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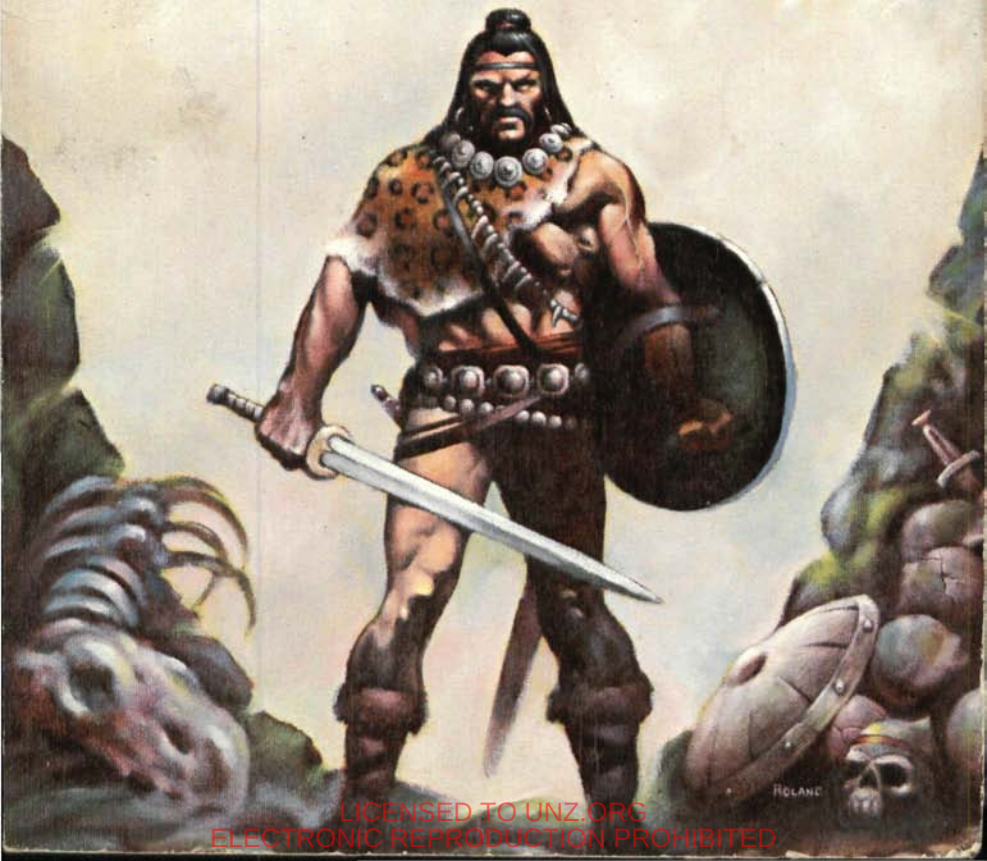

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JULY, 1973 VOL. 22, NO. 5

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TED WHITE

editorial

UNRELATED TOPICS

THE HUGO VOTING: Recently I mentioned that this magazine placed fifth out of five nominees in the 1972 Hugo balloting, as announced by LACon. Since I wrote that, the actual figures of the voting came into my hands and it would appear that this final-place finish was not precisely what happened, despite the fact that FANTASTIC was, officially, fifth in a field of five.

The actual figures go a long way to prove the truth of a modern cliché: that you *can* manipulate statistics.

Here's the way it worked:

The LACon, like most of the World SF Conventions of recent times, made use of the so-called Australian Ballot for the Hugo balloting. This ballot is designed to eliminate tie-votes without additional balloting, and does so in the following manner: On the ballot all five contenders are listed (in the case of the Professional SF Magazine category; in other categories there were sometimes six), plus an additional place for No Award. The voter is asked to rank each nominee according to his preference, giving his first choice a "1", his second a "2", etc.

When the ballots are initially counted, *only the first place votes are counted.* If no single nominee receives a majority of the vote, the nominee which placed last is dropped from contention and those ballots which gave that nominee a first-place vote are recounted, with the second-place choices going to the maining four nominees (and No Award), added to their first-place votes. This process is continued until one nominee has a majority (more than 50% of the votes).

Second place is determined by dropping the first-place winner and recounting all the second-place votes from those ballots which voted the winner first place. And the entire counting process is done over to determine the second-place winner. Third, fourth and fifth places are determined the same way.

On the surface, this is a sensible way to conduct voting, and the Australian Ballot has many adherents.

However, what it boils down to is a confusing set of figures. To illustrate what I mean, here's the way the original first-place votes stacked up:

Analog 155
F&SF 140
AMAZING 113
FANTASTIC 38
Galaxy 37

Now, purely in terms of first-place votes, *Analog* is the winner, with *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* a close second, AMAZING SF a somewhat weaker third, and FANTASTIC one vote ahead of *Galaxy* at the bottom. (No Award placed ahead of them both, with 44 first-place votes.)

In a Presidential election, such a plurality

(Cont. on page 113)

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Conan returns! Fresh from his encounter with Thoth-Amon in the fortress of Pohiola ("The Witch of the Mists," August, 1972), he must now journey deep into land of his enemy, to beard him in his lair if he can, under the—

BLACK SPHINX OF NEBTHU

L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & LIN CARTER

1. Place of Skulls.

NIGHT LAY like an ebon pall on the trampled, blood-soaked earth of Zingara. Through flying tatters of mist, as through a ragged shroud, the cold white skull of the moon leered down on a scene of horror. For the rolling, barren plain that sloped down to the shallow Alimane was encumbered with the sprawled, gore-splashed corpses of men and their mounts. In silent hundreds, dead knights and yeomen lay, some face-down in pools of congealing blood, others on their backs, with dead eyes staring up into the grinning jaws of the mocking moon. The hideous mirth of hyenas rang weirdly through the still air as the scavengers crunched and gobbled.

Few dwelt in this dreary northeastern corner of Zingara, and those few had been further thinned by centuries of war with and raids from Poitain, across the Alimane. The land had been largely abandoned to the prowling wolf and the slinking leopard. Some whispered that the semi-human ghouls, said by legend to haunt certain hills in central Zingara, had recently been seen in this region also. Tonight there was the makings of a feast both for ghouls and for hyenas.

The Zingarans called this grim region the Place of Skulls. Never before had it so well earned its name; never had the bitter sands drunk so deeply of hot blood. Never before had so many hacked and shaft-pierced men gone wailing down the red road to Hell, to litter the bleak waste with their bones.

And here the bright, imperial dreams of Pantho, duke of Guarralid, had been drowned in darkness, and the fires of his vaulting ambition had been quenched in blood. For the throne of Zingara was vacant. For that prize, Pantho had gambled all. He had led his band of adventurers into Argos and made himself master of its western

Illustrated by BILLY GRAHAM

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provinces. Old King Milo of Argos and his elder son had fallen in battle before him.

Then Duke Pantho had suddenly thrust his army deep into sunny Poitain, across the Alimane. Men supposed that he had done this to secure his rear before striking for the Zingaran capital of Kordava. They could only guess, since none knew for certain, and Pantho's tongue had been silenced forever by an Aquilonian sword.

Some whispered over flickering candles in southern taverns that a demon had taken possession of the great duke, or a sorcerer had sent a spell of madness upon him, goading him into this mad venture. For, as everyone knew, the leopards of Poitain crouched between the paws of the mighty lion of Aquilonia. King Conan, ruler of the mightiest kingdom of the West, had instantly hurled his iron legions against Pantho in retaliation for this breach of the border.

The armies had first clashed on the green plains of Poitain. The wild Zingaran charge had broken like surf against the stolid pikemen of Gunderland, while the shafts of the Bossonian archers mowed the Zingaran knights down, nailing helmet to head and thigh to horse. As Pantho withdrew his mounted knights to regroup for a second charge, Conan had unleashed his own cavalry. Conan's own guard, the Black Dragons, had led the charge. Conan himself rode in the van, a warrior so heroic that a thousand legends clung like a cloak of glory about his towering frame.

The Zingarans faltered and broke. They fled in a mad scramble back across the marches of Poitain to Zingara. But Conan was angry, and his anger was such as to shake thrones and make princes turn pale. Leaving his foot to follow as best it could, Conan had hurled his horse across the Alimane in pursuit. On the desolate Place of Skulls, a few leagues south of the Alimane, Conan had caught up with the battered Zingaran host and cut it to ribbons. Many Zingarans died, some yielded, and few escaped. Pantho's bright dream had drowned in a crimson sea.

ON A KNOLL commanding a view of the desolate, corpse-strewn battlefield stood a great tent. Above it flew a black banner charged with a golden lion, the ensign of King Conan. About the base of this hillock stood the tents of the lesser nobility, including one surmounted by the banderole of Poitain. Here old Count Trocero of Poitain gulped wine and cursed his surgeons as they dressed his wounds.

The army itself camped on the plain roudabout. Weary warriors snored in their blanket rolls or squatted by guttering fires. They diced for prizes: gold-inlaid shields, plumed helms, swords with gems twinkling in their hilts. With dawn they would drive deeper into Zingara, to set a puppet on Ferdrugo's throne and end the dynastic squabbles that for years had roiled the peace of this contentious land.

Before the king's tent, guardsmen of the Black Dragons stood with naked broadswords, guarding the rest of their lord. But there was little sleep for Conan that night. In his tent, lanterns glowed and flickered in their wrought-

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iron cages. Weary, battle-scarred commanders sat or stood about. At a folding table, inlaid with precious ivory from distant Vendhya, the great king brooded over maps of crackling parchment as he planned the morrow's march.

Conan had seen over half a century of battle and bloodshed, and the years had left their mark on even so mighty a king. Time had laid its silver in the coarse black hair of his square-cut mane and had grizzled the heavy black mustache that swept out from either side of his long upper lip. Strange suns had burnt his flesh to a leathery hue, and weary years had etched furrows among the scars of war and conquest. But power still lay in the massive thews, and the vitality of his barbarian heritage still blazed in the deep-set eyes of volcanic blue that glared beneath scowling black brows.

Shifting his massive limbs and growling for wine, Conan stared at the maps. The sting of several small wounds annoyed him no more than the bite of a gnat, although a softer, city-bred man might have been stretched groaning on his pallet had he shed the blood that the Cimmerian had lost that day. While Conan pondered and consulted with his officers, his squires fussed about him, unbuckling the many straps of his harness, gently removing plate after plate, while the surgeon gingerly washed and bandaged his cuts and salved his bruises.

"This one needs must be sewn, sire," said the surgeon.

"Ouch!" grunted Conan. "Go ahead, man, and pay no heed to my plaints. Pallantides, which were the quickest route hence to Stygia?"

"That one, sire," said the general, drawing a forefinger across the parchment.

"Aye; I followed it to here when I fled from Xaltotun's sorcery . . ."

Conan's voice trailed off. With his chin on his massive fist, he stared unseeing into space and time. A shadow of suspicion crossed his brain, evoked by his memory of his struggle with the dread Acheronian sorcerer, Xaltotun, a decade and a half before.

There was something about this mad invasion by Duke Pantho that did not fit what he had heard of that astute and crafty adventurer. Only a fool or a madman would have hurled his army against one of Conan's most loyal and warlike provinces. Conan, who had matched steel with Pantho that day and split the duke's skull with one terrific stroke, did not think that the man had been either mad or foolish.

He suspected an unseen hand behind that addle-pated expedition, a shadowy figure lurking at Pantho's back. He smelled a plot. In fact, he smelled sorcery.

2. *Destiny in White.*

THE CAPTAIN of the king's guard that night was one Amric, an adventurer out of Koth, drawn to golden Tarantia years before by the magic of Conan's name and the legend of his prowess. "Amric the Bull," his fellow Black Dragons called him, as much for his amatory prowess as for his headlong onset in battle. He was barrel-chested and deep-voiced. Like many Kothians, he was olive of skin, with perhaps a

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trace of Shemitish blood, as suggested by his thick, ringleted black beard. When a quiet little man in dirty white robes came gliding through the murk to the king's tent, Amric alone knew him for what he was.

"Fires of Moloch!" Amric swore. "A druid out of Pictland, or I'm a eunuch!" He shifted his sword to his left hand so as to sketch a protective sign on the night air with his right.

The small man laughed and lurched; Amric suspected that he was drunk. "Your sins have found you out, Amric of Khorshemish!" he said.

Amric swore heartily, invoking the nether organs of several of the more disreputable eastern demon-gods. He paled, and sweat beaded his brow. His fellow guards looked curiously at him, for never in the fiercest battle had they seen their captain show fear. They eyed the little man with curiosity and suspicion.

He was a harmless-looking person, well past middle years. Save for a few straggling wisps of thin white hair, he was bald as an egg. He had watery blue eyes in a pale, loose-wattled face. His legs, where they showed beneath his robe, were as scrawny as a fowl's. All in all, he was a most unlikely person to find on a battlefield.

"He knows you, Bull," rumbled a blond Vanr. "Is't a daughter, old man, with an unexpectedly black-avised babe, or an unpaid wineshop bill the size of a duke's treasury?"

The others laughed loudly, but Amric scowled. "Keep civil tongues in your heads, you northern heathen," he rumbled. Turning to the small man, who leaned on his staff with a faint, cherubic smile, he bowed and pulled off his dragon-crested helm.

"What can I do for you, Holy Father?" he asked with more civility than was his normal wont.

Amric had learned the wisdom of such politeness years before, when he had served on the Bossonian Marches. There he had seen the terrific power wielded by mild-seeming, white-robed men like this, who walked with oaken staves and with golden sickles thrust through their girdles as emblems of their rank. For they were the druids, the priests of the Ligureans. The Ligureans, a race of light-skinned barbarians who dwelt in small clans in Pictland, intermingled with the shorter, darker, and more savage Picts. Those bloody savages, who feared neither god, man, beast, nor devil, still cowered before the authority of the druids.

"I am fain to see your king ere taking a bit of rest," said the little man. Casually, he added: "I am Diviatix, chief druid of Pictland. Pray tell your King Conan that I am come from the Great Grove with a message. The Lords of Light have given me a command for their servant, Conan, and I bear his destiny in my hand."

Amric the Bull shivered, signed himself with the sign of Mitra, and meekly turned to obey the behest of the white druid.

CONAN SENT his commanders away, ordered hot spiced wine, and sat back. He ignored the sting of his bandaged wounds to listen to the spindle-shanked little messenger from Pictland.

The king of Aquilonia cared little for the priests of any god. His own

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shadowy Cimmerian god, Crom, was indifferent to the woe or weal of mankind, as befitted one of the Old Gods who one day chanced playfully to mold the earth from a lump of mud and set it spinning amid the stars for an idle jest—thereafter paying it little heed, perhaps forgetful they had wrought it at all. But, like Amric, Conan had borne a blade against the howling Pictish hordes and deeply respected their prowess. Not even the mighty warriors of the frozen North, in their berserker madness, could long stand against the inhuman ferocity of the Picts, whose neighbors and allies the Ligureans were only a shade less fierce.

As for the mystic wizard-priests of the Ligureans—Conan's long, bloody career had brought him into contact with half the cults and creeds of the world. Of them all, he thought, none stood so near the blinding flame of ultimate truth as did the quiet, smiling, white-robed men who wore the oak-leaf crown.

It took several cups of mulled vintage to get the whole message out of Diviatix. Conan had heard of the priest, for he was first amongst the world's druids. More than once had the gods spoken to the men of his age through the lips of this unimpressive, sleepy-looking old man, notoriously fond of the juice of the grape. Even the bloodthirsty war chief of the Pictish Confederation, Dekanawatha Blood-ax, who knelt to no man or devil, groveled in the dirt as Diviatix ambled past his palacehut, the mud-bricks of which were dyed russet with the blood of countless foes.

From the Great Grove at Nuadwyddon had the chief druid come, obeying the Lord of the Great Abyss, Nuadens Argatlam of the Silver Hand. Diviatix bore a message from the Lords of Creation to the grim giant they had brought out of wintry Cimmeria long years before, to crush evil in the world's West. The token they bade the white druid bring was a small tablet of nameless stone, slick and heavy as jade but as purple as the towers of age-forgotten Valusia. Conan knew of that stone, albeit not even the iron-bound *Book of Skelos* dared whisper of it.

For an hour by the ringed time candle, Conan listened to the white druid's sleepy, wine-befuddled discourse. The moon sank; dawn ensanguined the east. The heir to the throne of Zingara, daughter of the late King Ferdrugo, had come out of exile with her husband to beg the king of Aquilonia for help in regaining the crown. But Conan kept Princess Chabela—with her consort Olivero and their highborn entourage—waiting on the slope below his tent while he queried the sleepy little man in tattered robes that had once been white.

WITH DAWN, the trumpets sang. The tents were struck, and the knights of Aquilonia mounted up.

Conan settled the problem of the Zingaran royal succession in ten minutes. He had known Chabela twenty years before, when she had been a buxom lass still in her teens and he the captain of a Zingaran privateer. Then Conan had saved the throne and fortunes of old King Ferdrugo from the villainous schemes of the Stygian master-sorcerer, Thoth-Amon.

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In the intervening years, Chabela had put on weight. She was still a handsome woman but in a plump, matronly fashion. The graying king kissed her heartily, asked after her eleven children, but did not linger to hear her account of their inches and illnesses. He bade her harried consort kneel, slapped Olivero on both shoulders with the flat of his nicked broadsword, and heard his oath of allegiance and fealty. Conan issued a curt fiat proclaiming the flustered couple rightful king and queen of Zingara under the overlordship of Aquilonia. He dispatched them in haste to Kordava, with a troop of Aquilonian knights to see them safely installed.

Then, stifling a prodigious yawn, Conan swung up on his black stallion, and the lion banner moved southeast to the tread of six thousand horse and foot. Southeast, to the Argossean border and beyond that toward Stygia.

3. *The March to the Styx.*

THEY MARCHED SOUTHEAST by stages, ten hours of steady marching to a stage. The steady stride of the strong Aquilonian yeomen ate up the leagues, and the army was across the border of Argos before the Argosseans learned that Duke Pantho, whose incursions had shattered their peace, was no more. Conan sent a message to Milo's second son, young Ariostro, who was trying to rally the scattered Argossean forces in the South. This princeling was told that the Zingaran menace had been dissipated, so that nought prevented Ariostro from proclaiming himself king of Argos. Meanwhile, King Conan would count it a courtesy if Ariostro would graciously permit the Aquilonian force to pass through his dominions on their way to Stygia.

Then Conan dispatched heralds in black-and-gold tabards to his vassal-kings, Ludovic of Ophir and Belardus of Koth. He curtly bade them each to raise a force of two thousand horse and foot. These forces were to rendezvous with the Aquilonians at the ford of Bubastes on the Styx, between the green meadows of Shem and the tawny sands of Stygia.

League after league, Conan drove deeper southeast in grim silence, pressing his men hard. With them came the little druid in a rattling mule cart. Conan told none why he had sent the senior herald, Black Wyvern King at Arms, back to Tarantia guarded by a troop of light horse. Even Prospero and Trocero did not dare ask him about his intentions. His old comrades knew better than to question him when he was in one of these dour, secretive, taciturn moods.

CONAN DESCENDED upon Shem like a steel whirlwind. By forced marches, he drove his army across the meadowlands in fifteen days. From time to time they passed one or another of the Shemitish cities, each of which raised its drawbridge and locked its gates in alarm, rousing archers to man the walls.

Conan dispatched Trocero with heralds to pacify each agitated Shemitish kinglet in turn. The old Count, a silver-tongued master diplomat, soothed the tempers ruffled by this unexpected intrusion. To the ruler of each petty city-state, he explained that the Aquilonian army was but passing

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peacefully through, with—it was hoped—the kind permission of the Shemitish princelings. A token tribute of good Aquilonian silver was paid over, each thick coin stamped with Conan's square-jawed, scowling profile. Relieved, thier ruffled pride sleeked by Trocero's oratory, the kinglets beamed graciously and waved the Aquilonian host on with their blessings.

The army, of course, had meant to go on anyway. But it is better, Conan had learned, to do these things when possible with official blessings. To be fair, Conan saw that his troops observed his laws against looting and rapine. The few of his soldiers who turned aside to chase a dark-eyed Shemitish wench into a thicket or to leaven their field rations with some peasant's fat pig were promptly hanged in view of their comrades. It went against Conan's grain to deprive the poor fools of their lives, for as a young mercenary, he, too, had committed the same offenses many times.

But the law is the law. The last thing Conan wanted was to reach the borders of ominous, hostile Stygia with his modest force, leaving at his back an aroused countryside, buzzing with outraged petty kings and swarming with vengeful soldiery. Ordinarily the Shemitish city-states did not bother the neighboring nations, being occupied with their internal royal feuds and theological bickerings. The one thing that would unite them, however, was the passage of a marauding, murdering foreign army. Conan had fought with Shemites before, both at their side and against them. He knew that the hooknosed, black-bearded, mailed *asshuri* were, man for man, as tough and ferocious as any soldiers in the world.

ONE WEARY AFTERNOON, white with road dust, they reached the shores of the Styx and camped behind a screen of willows. An hour's march away lay the Ford of Bubastes. They sat for a day and a half, resting men and horses and honing and oiling weapons, while the troops from Koth and Ophir arrived to join them.

Next morning young Prince Conn, eldest of Conan's two legitimate sons, rode into camp at the head of a troop on lathered horses. At thirteen, the crown prince of Aquilonia was the spit and image of his mighty sire. Almost as tall as even the towering knights of Aquilonia, he had Conan's broad shoulders, deep-arched chest, square-cut mane of coarse black hair, and strong, square-jawed face.

The boy had ridden across Shem in six days but looked as if he had been out for an afternoon's canter. His fierce blue eyes sparkled with excitement, and fresh color blazed in his cheeks. He galloped into camp on a big gelding, acknowledging the roar of welcome from the troops with a grin and a flip of his hand. The youth was a favorite with the men, and the Black Dragons would have ridden into the jaws of Hell for him as readily as for his mighty sire.

The prince reined his horse to a halt before the royal tent, vaulted out of the saddle, and knelt grinning before the king. Conan kept his face grave, although he was bursting with pride and affection. He acknowledged the prince's salute, but as soon as they were

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inside the tent he crushed the boy in a rough bear-hug that might have snapped the ribs of a frailer lad.

"How fares your lady mother?" he demanded.

"She is well," Conn replied—then, with a mischievous grin: "but she shrieked and wailed like a wounded buffalo to hear that you wanted me in the field. Her last words were to keep warm at night and not to get my feet wet!"

"How like a woman!" grunted Conan. "I remember my old mother, back in Cimmeria . . . But you should not compare your lady mother to a buffalo, boy! That's impertinent!"

"Yes, sire," said the youth contritely. Then eyes sparkling, "But are we really going to cross over into Stygia, father? Do you really want me with you in battle?"

"Crom, boy, how can you learn the art of war without a little fighting? When you ascend the throne, you'll have to hold it against war and revolution. The exercise yard is all very well, but the battlefield is the schoolyard of future kings. Just see to it that you hold the place in ranks to which I assign you; no galloping alone against the foe, trying to rout them single-handed! Come, how are your brother and sister?"

Conn relayed reports on his younger brother, seven-year-old Taurus, and baby sister, Radegund.

"Good!" said Conan. "Did the priests come with you as commanded?"

"Aye. They bear a little box of orichalc, covered with strange glyphs, and they would not tell me what was in it. Do you know, father?"

Conan nodded. "That's what you might call our 'secret weapon.' Now get a good repast and a good night's sleep. Ere dawn we shall cross into Stygia!"

4. *Beyond Death River.*

THE DARK, GLIDING WATERS of the Styx mark the border between Shem and Stygia. Some call it the River of Death, saying that the clammy vapors that rise from the marshes are hostile; others, that the muddy waters are inimical to all forms of life, so that no fish or other creatures swim in them. This last is untrue, for at night along the banks one can hear the harsh grunt of the scaly cocodrill and the thunderous snort of the burly hippopotamus. But certain it is that the waters are hostile to human life, and he who bathes in those waters is soon stricken with a wasting and incurable disease.

Where the headwaters of the Styx rise, no man can say. It originates somewhere far to the south of the tawny sands of Stygia, in the jungled lands beyond Keshan and Punt. Some whisper that it rises in Hell itself, to flow through the lands of living men like a gliding black serpent.

Before dawn crimsoned the eastern horizon, Conan was on the move. The king, on his big black, led the way across the Ford of Bubastes to the low, reedy shore beyond. On the far side stood a half-ruined blockhouse of crumbled mud brick. Once it had guarded the crossing, but disturbances in the sinister kingdom of Stygia had led to its neglect, and it had not been repaired. The Stygians depended upon

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swift-moving mounted patrols along their borders to keep strangers at bay, but none of these was now to be seen.

To right and left of the blockhouse stretched fields of yellow winter wheat, rippling in the dawn breeze. In the middle distance to the right, barely visible against the dun-colored background, a small village of mud-brick huts crouched on the edge of the river. Ahead, as the ground sloped gently up from the Styx, the palms, shrubs, and cultivation that lined the river gradually gave way to a scattering of camel-thorn and other desert plants.

Conan, flanked by Trocero and Pallantides, commander of the Black Dragons and second in command to Conan, kicked his horse up the slope of a knoll. He watched gloomily as, company by company, the Aquilonian host splashed through the ford in a long double column. As each unit of infantry emerged from the water, its captain led it to a vacant spot along the marge. There the men were made to sit, pull off their boots, and dry their feet and footgear. The king had so commanded. The men muttered at this strange proceeding. But Conan, who had been in these parts before, deemed it a vital precaution against the disease that lurked in the black waters of Death River.

Meanwhile, a few troops of light horse cantered up and down the river and inland to scout for possible trouble. Sitting in his saddle beside Conan, Count Trocero chewed his mustache. At last he spoke:

"Sire, isn't it time you shared your thoughts with us?"

Conan grunted moodily and nodded. "Aye, my friends, I have kept you in the dark long enough."

"Then why in Mitra's name are we in accursed Stygia?" asked Pallatides.

"Because this is the land of our secret enemy, Thoth-Amon the sorcerer."

Conn, sitting his gelding nearby, pricked up his ears. "Thoth-Amon!" he exclaimed. "The one that got the old witch of Pohiola to kidnap me last year, trying to get you into her clutches?"

"There is only one Thoth-Amon," said Conan broodingly, "and Crom knows the earth will be cleaner without him. The white druid bore warning of his schemes."

"Do you mean that spindle-shanked little old winesop, Diviatix?"

"That spindle-shanked old winesop is the greatest white magician alive on Earth in our age," said Conan. Trocero gulped and shuddered, remembering the times he had snarled at the staggering old tosspot to get out of his way. Conan continued grimly:

"The oracle of the Great Grove in Pictland reveals that the Stygian wizard was behind Pantho's crazy thrust. The sorcerer either bribed Pantho or seized command of his mind through his black arts."

"But to what purpose?" asked Trocero. Pallantides had ridden away down the hill to get the army into formation for the next march. Conan continued:

"Merely a diversion, to get me away from Tarantia. The Stygian knew I would ride to join you against the Zingarans. He hoped that Pantho and I should play hide-and-seek in the hills for a fortnight or two, keeping me so

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busy I should not have time to worry about Tarantia—"

"Tarantia! Not the queen?"

"Be calm, man. Zenobia and the royal heirs are safe. But there's something in Tarantia that Thoth-Amon desires more than anything on earth—even more than my life. He hoped to get it in my absence. He hired the world's cleverest thieves—the High Guild of Arenjun—to steal that thing.

But Thoth-Amon miscalculated. He never dreamed that I should smash Pantho so quickly, nor that the oracle of Nuadwyddon would send the white druid to apprise me of the plot. Nor did he know that the spring rains would block the mountain passes out of Zamora, delaying the master thieves and ruining his delicate timing.

"He thinks me still in the North, chasing Pantho over the hilltops of Poitain. Believing me ignorant of his plan, he has no cause to suspect otherwise. The white druid has kept our descent into Stygia invisible to the magical vision of the Stygian, or as invisible as possible. With luck, we shall be at his gates ere he knows we are within a hundred leagues of him."

"What is this thing he so desperately wants?" asked Trocero.

"I know, Count!" said the boy. "It is—"

Pallantides cantered up and saluted. "The baggage is over the river, O King!" said the general. "The men are ready to march."

Conan nodded. "Give the signal: east along the river for three leagues, till we come to a small tributary, the Bakhr. Then south, ascending that stream, for half a league. I am coming shortly."

Conan glared inland, into the dawn-reddened reaches of shadow-haunted Stygia.

"Twice in as many years," he mused, "a plot has struck at my throne out of this accursed land of crumbling tombs and crawling sands. This time, I will carry the battle to the enemy's doorstep. Mayhap his sorcery will strike us dead, but I think not. The Gods of Light fight on our side. And, come death or victory, I shall beard Thoth-Amon in his lair and see if he can magic away a yard of good Aquilonian steel through his guts!"

The bugles blew. They rode down the slope to join the host.

5. *The City of Tombs.*

A CURSE SEEMED to overhang Stygia. The further the Aquilonian warriors marched into it, the more they became aware of it. It was a subtle thing: mocking whispers in an eerie wind, muttering voices that spoke too low to catch their words. Small, whispering winds slunk among the dunes and rattled the palm fronds. The soldiers had the haunting sensation of unseen eyes at their backs. The sun glared pitilessly from behind a thin veil of white cirrus, and the dry air gave the marchers a feeling of constant thirst.

They passed another village—a jumble of low, dun-colored mud huts, whose brown-skinned inhabitants fled yammering over the waste at the sight of the mailed host. The Bakhr proved to be a small, stagnant, muddy watercourse, from whose banks several monstrous cocodrills slithered ponderously into the water at the approach

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of the force.

The army turned inland—south—and marched up the tributary, skirting the reed banks and thickets that flanked it. The men muttered uneasily and fingered amulets or mumbled litanies and mantras under their breath. But the force strode on, ever deeper into shadow-haunted Stygia.

Prince Conn cast an eye at the sun and cantered forward to come up with his sire. "Father, are we not riding due south?"

Conan grunted assent.

"But," persisted the boy, "I have always heard that this Thoth-Amon dwelt in an oasis called Khajar, far to the west of here!"

Conan shrugged. "At least, lad, your tutors have taught you to read maps. But Thoth-Amon dwells no more in that scarlet sink of iniquity. Now he makes his lair in Nebthu."

"Nebthu?"

"A ruined city to the south; we shall be there soon. Years ago, lad, Thoth-Amon rose to power in this land and became prince of the Black Ring, the world-wide guild of black magicians, whose secret headquarters, I am told, lies at Nebthu. The better to keep this unholy brotherhood under his governance, he removed from his lair in the west to Nebthu.

"Once he lost his magical ring of power, and his enemies among the sorcerers cast him out. He fell into the hands of slavers and was brought as far from his home as Aquilonia."

"Was it he who sent the demon that would have slain you, but for the sign of the phoenix on your sword?"

"The same. By happenstance, Thoth-Amon recovered his ring and returned to Khajar. Meanwhile a rival sorcerer, Thutothmes, had risen to command of the Black Ring, making his headquarters in Khemi. Thutothmes based his power upon a mighty talisman called the Heart of Ahriman.

"For a time, the Black Ring was riven into two factions, that of Thutothmes and that of Thoth-Amon. But, ere the battle between them was fairly joined, Thutothmes perished in combat with a crew of Khitan wizards who had followed me thither to slay me. The Khitans died also, and I bore the Heart back to Tarantia."

"Now, however, Thoth-Amon has again seized control of the Black Ring, seeking to draw all the black magicians of the world into his circle of confederates. The oracle tells me that he is at Nebthu."

Conn nodded thoughtfully. Count Trocéro, who had been listening closely, asked:

"Is this city well guarded, then?"

Conan shrugged. "Mitra knows. The last rumor I heard was that it was long since abandoned and crumbling into ruin. Perchance the wizards have rebuilt it and patched its walls. But, even if they have, with ten thousand sharp swords at our backs I am sure we can storm it."

"We shall be doing just that, belike," said the shrill voice of the druid, bumping along behind them in his mule cart.

Trocero turned in his saddle to look at the little man, who seemed to be drunk as usual. The count forced a polite smile and muttered:

"It likes me not, this empty, accursed

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land."

Conan made no answer; they rode on in silence.

THE SUN WAS DECLINING when scouts came galloping back to the column to report. Nebthu was dead.

Soon the army came within sight of the ruin. The huge wall that had once encircled the city had crumbled, leaving upright only the great pylons that once flanked the gate. These pylons, carved with the leering gargoyle masks of grinning monsters, still rose above the drifted sands.

Save for a few birds, which rose from the ruins and whirred away, there was no sign of life. No plume of smoke rose from cooking hearth or guardhouse fire. Roofs had fallen in; buildings had decayed into mere mounds of crumbling mud brick.

Conan's horse shied at a round, white stone in the roadway. As the black's hoof grazed it, the thing rolled a little way before halting. Black holes peered up. It was a skull, fit emblem of Nebthu, city of immemorial tombs. Naught moved here, save the scuttling scorpion, the gliding sand viper, or perhaps the wandering ghosts of long-buried Stygian kings.

"Now what do we do?" murmured the count of Poitain.

"Make camp and fetch water from the Bakhr," growled the king. "After that, we shall see."

The skull grinned up at them in silent mockery.

6. The Thing that Crouched in the Waste.

THEY MADE CAMP outside the broken walls of the ruined city. Conan knew that his warriors would not sleep easily in the sand-drifted streets or rubble-choked squares of the Stygian metropolis. Magical influences often lingered about any ancient ruin, and this was all the more true of age-accursed Stygia than of other, more wholesome, lands.

While a detachment of soldiers cut armfulls of the feathery reeds that grew along the Bakhr, for fodder for the horses, scouts explored the desert about the walls of Nebthu. Soon the scouts rode back to report that nothing lived or moved amidst the dunes. They had, however, found one thing in the waste: a gigantic idol or monument. As the afternoon waned, Conan led a party to investigate, while the cooking fires were lit in the camp. Conan's big black shied, rolled its eyes, and laid back its ears as they approached the stone monster.

"Crom, Mitra, and Varuna!" said Conan as he gazed upon the stone titan that loomed before them against lurid sunset skies. Trocero cursed; as for the white druid, he called on Nuadens, Danu, and Epona and took a hasty swig from his wineskin as if to fortify himself.

The statue crouched amid the waste like some primal monster. It was made of some smooth, lustrous black stone, like jet or basalt. Its form was sphinx-like, but its head was neither that of a lion nor that of a man, but of some beast of prey with a long skull, round ears, and massive jaws. It crouched doglike, as if it were some gaunt jackal.

"I thought the black magicians of this hellish land all worshipped Set the

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Old Serpent," said Trocero. "What hell-spawned devil-thing is that?"

Diviatix rubbed his eyes. "By the horns of Cernunnos, 'tis the ghoul-hyena of Chaos!" he said. "I had not thought ever to see its likeness wrought by human hands."

As Conan peered more closely in the fading dusk, he saw that the sculptor of the hyena-sphinx had achieved an extraordinary fidelity to life. The loose lips of the beast were slightly drawn back to reveal its blunt, bone-crushing fangs, as if it would rise up any moment and hurl itself, slobbering and snapping, upon them. Conan's nape-hair stirred and a cold breath of ominous foreboding chilled his blood.

"Let us begone," growled the king, "or that black abortion will haunt our dreams tonight . . ."

THE COALS OF SUNSET smouldered and died; gloom enshrouded the sands of Stygia. The new moon closely followed the sun down the sky and out of sight, leaving the vault of heaven to a vast multitude of brilliant stars, which glowed and twinkled red and green and white in strangely unfamiliar constellations.

A town of tents sprang up in the desert near Nebthu. Cook-fires blazed, casting a cheerful orange glow over the dim sands. A subdued host ate its rations and lay down, wrapped in blankets, to seek an uneasy slumber. Sentries—twice the usual number—alertly paced the perimeter. The desert night was empty, dark, and silent, but alive—and waiting.

Weary from many days of forced marching, Conan was too restless to sleep. After midnight, he rose and called a squire to light an oil lamp. He poured himself a small stoup of wine and sat on his camp stool, senses tingling with alertness, as if his barbarian instincts had roused him to some unseen danger.

Growling a curse, he pulled on breeches and padded haqueton. "My armor," he told the squire. "Nay, nay, not the plate; the chain shirt. We wend afoot tonight."

He disregarded his full knightly panoply because it would have taken too long for the squire to buckle the many straps and because its great weight would have slowed him down on foot. Donning boots, steel cap, and baldric, he stood for a moment, brooding. Then he unlocked his strongbox and took out the small box of orichalc, which the priests of Mitra had brought from Tarantia.

Entering the nearest tents, Conan shook Trocero and Conn awake. Then he went in to rouse the white druid. He found the little man wide awake, wrapped in a blanket and huddled shivering before a brazier. Diviatix seemed like one in a daze, like the Khitans whom Conan had seen bemused on the fumes of the poppy.

"Rouse yourself, druid!" he said. "I sense danger."

The flabby jowls of the Ligurean priest were pale, his eyes vacant and haunted. He stared into the darkness with a black, unseeing stare.

"Eyes," he whispered. "Shadows with eyes. There is evil in the night . . ."

Conan shook the hunched figure by the shoulder. "Up, priest! Is it drunk that you are again?"

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Diviatix blinked and laughed weakly. "Drunk? By the breasts of Mother Danu, King, I have swilled enough wine to send half this host staggering, but I am cold sober!"

Conan shivered and whirled, peering into the darkness. But there was nothing there—nothing but shadows.

7. *Shadows with Eyes.*

CONAN STRODE out into the dim, star-filled night. The bemused druid, bearing his oaken staff, trotted at his heels. Trocero, armed and alert, awaited his coming with the yawning prince. Pallantides hastened up.

"What is it, sire?" asked the general.

"I know not, but something," grumbled Conan. "Crom curse it, I can't put a name to it, but something's wrong . . ."

"Shall I rouse the host?"

"Not yet. Let the men get what sleep they can while they may. But double the sentries again. Let us make our own sentry-round; perchance the guards have seen something. Pallantides, lend me two stout men-at-arms who fear neither god, man, or devil."

A pair of yawning Gundermen presently approached with a clink of mail. They were big men, deep-chested, with impassive faces and hard eyes. Conan looked them over and liked what he saw. Then the king jerked his head. "Come."

They strode down the sandy lane between rows of tents and out toward the edge of the encampment. But there, the sentries had seen nothing, although they had vigilantly prowled and peered. Amric, who commanded that sentry watch, said:

"Nothing at all, Lord King, save the far-off yapping of jackals. But some complain of—well, shadows!"

"What kind of shadows?" demanded Conan.

The burly Kothian scratched his beard. "Well, sire, the men say—foolishness, I know!—that they see shadows where no shadows should be, not cast by any visible snape. The fools complain that the shadows watch them!"

"Shadows with eyes! My vision was true," Diviatix moaned.

Conan chewed a tuft of his mustache. "Shadows, eh? They'll be starting at mice next! Well, these lords and I will pace on sentry-go for a time, to see if we can find your prowling shadows."

Loosening his blade in its scabbard, Conan led Trocero, Conn, the druid and the two soldiers around the camp. His boots squealed and crunched in the dry sand. The torches in the hands of the soldiers hissed and sputtered. Their flames streamed in the uneasy wind, sending shadows scurrying before and behind them as they trudged about the perimeter.

Young Conn stopped short, seized his father's arm, and pointed. Conan looked in the direction of the pointing finger and grunted.

"*Footprints!* It seems we have a spy, after all! For never yet have I heard tell of shadows that leave footprints in soft sand."

Tocero fingered his hilt. "Sire, shall I sound the horn and rouse the guard?"

"For one skulking spy? Nonsense, man! We'll track the rogue to his lair ourselves. Time enough to summon

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the watch if we stumble upon a nest of Thoth-Amon's Set-worshippers." Conan drew his steel. "You!" he said to one of the Gundermen. "Go back and tell Pallantides whither we have gone. Tell him to send a squad of stout rogues on our track, but that they shall not come up with us unless we get into trouble. I hope to catch the slinker unawares, and their clatter would alert him a league away."

Without further ado, the Cimmerian plunged off in the direction the footprints led. The long march without opposition had made the king restless and reckless. The others crowded after. Soon the track had led them over the dunes beyond the sight of the camp.

"Look sire!" Trocero hissed, pointing.

Conan stifled a grunt. Was it a blur of strained eyes, a trick of shadows, or did he glimpse a form, hooded and cloaked in black, flitting before them toward the Black Sphinx?

"Follow me!" Conan whispered, plodding after the form.

8. *That Which Fled in the Night.*

As GLITTERING STARS wheeled slowly overhead, Conan and his companions crunched through the hissing sand on the track of the fleeing form. Ever it stayed just beyond the range of their vision, flitting ahead like a desert phantom.

Now the stony monster that dominated these wastes loomed up before them, blotting out the stars, which outlined its hyena's head. The black-cloaked form flitted silently between the outstretched paws of the gigantic monster. For an instant they dimly discerned it against the breast of the towering sphinx; then it merged with the stone and vanished.

"Crom!" breathed Conan, his nape hairs rising with a barbarian's awe of the supernatural.

The mystery, however, was soon solved. As they neared the stony breast, they observed, barely visible in the starlight, a black crack in the smooth stone. It was a huge doorway, thrice the height of a man, cunningly made so that, when shut, it would blend with the solid stone of the monster. As they approached, the door was slowly closing on unseen hinges, and the black crack was narrowing to a hairline.

Conan sprinted forward and jammed his sword hilt into the crack. The closing stopped. Then the king inserted his fingers into the crack and heaved. Sweat burst out on his brow, and the massive muscles of his arms, back, and shoulders stood out beneath his mail.

The portal opened with a squeal. Conan snatched up his sword from where it had fallen and, brandishing naked steel, sprang without a moment's hesitation into the gaping black maw. The others followed, although the druid hesitated.

To the remaining Gunderman, Conan said: "Give me your torch, what's your name—Thorus, is it not? Plant your pike so it holds this door open, and run back to the camp. Tell Pallantides to send a whole company after us. Yare, now! The rest of you, follow me!"

WITHIN THE SPHINX, they followed a high, wide corridor of solid stone. The

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torch guttered, stretching misshapen black shadows over the rough stone walls. Wary of traps and pitfalls, Conan and his companions traced the corridor, descending by a broad stone stair to the second level, beneath the sands of the desert.

"By Mitra, no wonder we found no one in the city," breathed Trocero. "The black magicians were all hiding down in this maze!"

In truth, it was a maze. Corridors branched off at intervals, multiplying until they became a labyrinth. Conan smeared a dab of pitch from the hissing torch at every change of direction, so that they could retrace their steps and regain the surface. But all the chambers they searched were untenanted and bare of furnishings. Where were the wizards of the Black Ring?

"Crom!" Conan wondered aloud. "Are there levels even deeper than this? If that philosophers' notion be true, that the world is round, meseems we shall soon come out the other side!"

As they descended another stair, Trocero urged: "Sire, should we not go back for help?"

"Mayhap; but I've a notion to search this place first," Conan growled. "The lads should be coming up behind us soon, and thus far we've found nought to beware of. Let us go on!"

At the foot of that last flight of stone stairs, they entered a gigantic chamber, huge as an arena, ringed with tiers of stone benches. Lifting his torch, Conan searched the nearby benches with this wavering light, which illumined only a small fraction of the vast area. The place reminded Conan of the great hippodrome of Tarantia, save that the latter was out in the clean open air, not buried deep down in the fetid blackness below the world's crust.

"What do you suppose they use this place for?" he muttered.

Trocero opened his mouth to reply, but another voice broke in. It was a deep, strong, quiet voice, informed with the ring of triumph.

"We use it to dispose of our enemies, Conan of Aquilonia!"

Conan tensed. Before he could move, cold artificial light flared up, filling the vast arena with an uncanny and sourceless illumination almost as brilliant as daylight. By this illumination, the Cimmerian saw that the circling stone benches, on the further side, were occupied by hundreds of human figures, robed and cowled in black. To the right yawned a huge open portal, a yawning gulf of darkness, as large as that in the breast of the sphinx far above.

Directly before them, enthroned in a great chair of black stone above the lower rows of magicians, sat a tall, strongly-built figure wearing a simple, unadorned green robe. This man had the shaven pate, swarthy skin, slitted dark eyes, and hawklike features of a pure-blooded Stygian.

"Welcome to my empire," said Thoth-Amon, laughing.

THE SECOND GUNDERMAN, Thorus, whom Conan had dispatched to fetch reinforcements from the camp, lay silently on the sands beneath the wheeling stars, a bare hundred paces from the Sphinx of Nebthu, with a Stygian arrow through his throat.

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9. Red Swords of Stygia.

PALLANTIDES YELLED COMMANDS at running men. Trumpets brayed and hoofbeats thudded on the hissing sands.

Things had started going wrong at just the time that Conan and his companions entered the black sphinx. First came the desertion of the troops levied from Koth and Ophir. They had encamped on the far side of the site, and sentries came flying to the general to report that the entire force had fled under cover of darkness, either in mass panic or by some prearranged plan.

Pallantides swore sulphurously. He ordered a squadron of horse to pursue the runaways, but then it transpired that the Aquilonians had no horses. The mounted Kothians and Ophirians had taken their own horses, while the Kothian and Ophirian foot had commandeered the mounts of the Aquilonians. The few remaining animals had been turned loose and had galloped off into the desert with the deserters.

Then the first of the two soldiers who had accompanied Conan arrived, to pass on the king's request for a squad of troopers to follow on his track. Pallantides was picking his squad and giving them the news to pass to the king, when another sentry rushed in to cry:

"To arms, my lord! We are beset! The hordes of Stygia are upon us!"

All around the camp, the somber dunes began erupting men, mostly archers on horses and camels. The darkness made it impossible to ascertain their number. They rode round the camp in a vast swirl, plying their bows. Although the darkness prevented accurate archery, the Aquilonians still suffered a rain of arrows, discharged at random into the camp. Here and there a man yelled or cursed as a shaft found him.

Atop the dunes, other Stygian soldiery appeared, shooting fire arrows into the camp. The missiles tore comet-like paths through the dark; a tent blazed up, and another.

Most of the Aquilonian soldiers had already been aroused by the commotion caused by the desertion of the auxiliaries. Summoned by the trumpets' blare and the war cries of the Stygians, they stumbled out of their tents, red-faced and coughing from the smoke, pulling on helmets and buckling baldrics and chin straps.

"Put out the fires!" shouted Pallantides. "Strike the tents! Cenwulf! Where in hell are you?"

"Here," said the captain of the Bossonian archers, staggering up to the general. "Where is the king?"

"Mitra knows; he went off into the desert, tracking a spy. Spread your men around the perimeter and pick off some of these flitting black-cloaks. Detail a squad to beat down those bastards on the dune, with the fire arrows. Amric!"

"Here, general."

"Spread the men around in a circle outside the Bossonians, kneeling with pikes ready to stop a charge. Pile baggage before them and heap sand upon it for a breastwork . . ."

THOTH-AMON SMILED grimly down from his place of power in the underground arena.

"For too long, Cimmerian, have you stood in my path," said the Earth's

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greatest black magician. "I saw you venture into these southern lands from your frozen north, forty years ago. I ought to have crushed you then, when you were small and weak. Had I but known how your power would grow, I should have struck you down with a blast of magic—that first time, when you meddled in my affairs in the house of Kallian Publico; or again when you spoiled my schemes to wrest the kingdom of Zingara from King Ferdrugo's feeble grasp; or when I first glimpsed you in Count Valenso's stronghold on the Western Ocean; or in your early years of kinging it in Aquilonia when I was Ascalante's slave in Tarantia. These lapses, however, shall now be corrected."

Conan handed his guttering torch to Trocero and folded his mighty arms upon his chest. His face impassive, he bent his lionlike, glowering gaze upon Thoth-Amon.

"Speak your piece, Stygian," he rumbled. "You have gone to immense effort and exhausted your cunning to trick me into this trap. You might as well have your say."

A susurration, like the hissing of a nest of angry serpents, ran through the black-robed throng. Thoth-Amon laughed sardonically.

"Well said, dog of a northlander savage! I admire your coolness as much as my fellow sorcercers deplore your effrontery! But now, neither will help you to escape your long overdue punishment. You have crossed my path once too often, and this is the last act of our little drama. I have trapped Aquilonia's host as well as its king. As we exchange pleasantries, my warriors beleaguer your camp. Aquilonia's tall knights are falling to our swords like ripe wheat before the scythe. More than a dynasty ends here tonight; the armed might of a kingdom perishes as well."

Conan shrugged. "Mayhap. But I fear your slinking serpents little, and my tall knights will draw their crooked fangs with ease. Warriors, I doubt me not, are reaping a red harvest this hour—"

"I do not fight with swords alone—" Thoth-Amon smiled, gesturing with the fingers of one hand. A bolt of emerald fire sprang from his finger tips. It lanced across the arena and struck the naked sword in the hand of Trocero. The steel, bathed in the green ray, glowed red. Trocero dropped the smoking sword with an oath and put his blistered fingers in his mouth.

"—but with sorcery as well," Thoth-Amon concluded.

Conan continued to hold the glinting eyes of Thoth-Amon with his own somber gaze. "The only way to fight sorcery," he grunted, "is with sorcery."

The slight, hooded figure at Conan's side stepped forth, throwing off its dark cloak to reveal a white robe and an oak-leaf chaplet. The black magicians recoiled, hissing.

"It is a White Druid out of Pictland!" said a voice above the murmur.

"It is indeed," said Thoth-Amon grimly. "Unless my senses deceive me, it is none other than Diviatix."

"*Diviatix!*" The cry arose from a hundred throats. At a signal from the prince of sorcerers, they fell silent. The pressure of hundreds of eyes poured down upon Conan and his companions. The silent, concentrated power of those

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black, glittering eyes was unnerving.

Conan's skin crept. A coldness, like a small, bleak wind from one of his frozen northern hells, blew upon his heart. He felt a numbness creeping through his flesh. His vision blurred; his heart flatered. Behind him, young Conn gasped and staggered.

"S-sorcery!" breathed Conan. A malignant power beat down upon him from those intense, glittering eyes. His head swam. In a moment, he thought, the iron would drain from his muscles and he would slump to the floor of the arena.

10. *White Druid and Black Magician.*

THEN THE DRUID broke the spell. He spread his arms and brandished his oaken staff. Conan was astounded to see fresh young leaves sprout from the dead wood of the staff. Diviatix stood at the center of a pulsing aura of golden light. From his staff wafted the smell of healthy earth and green growing things. The warm light and the good smell beat back the artificial witchlight and the dank, mouldering stench that permeated these subterranean labyrinths of ancient stone.

The wizards of the Black Ring sagged back, their concentration broken. Some mopped sweat from their brows. Diviatix swayed, chuckling, as if all the wine he had drunk that night had at last caught up with him. But, small and unprepossessing though he was, there was no question but that he dominated this assembly.

Thoth-Amon laughed no longer; his wrinkled brow was drawn together in a scowl of concentration. Drawing himself up to his full regal height, he smote the White Druid with a second beam of crackling green flames. Diviatix fended it off with his staff, and it broke into a shower of hissing sparks.

Thoth-Amon hurled another, and another, and another. Taking heart from their leader, the prime sorcerers of the Black Ring came to their feet, adding their own beams of green force to the shower of deadly bolts that beat down upon Conan's party. For a few moments, the pulsing aura staved them off like a golden shield. Then Diviatix began to weaken. While he still held the golden glow intact, some shafts of cold green fire leaked through, to plow smoking furrows in the sand near where Conan and his comrades stood.

"White magic fails in the contest of strength, Cimmerian!" Thoth-Amon called.

"Well, then, perhaps it is time to strengthen it."

Conan drew from his girdle a small box of gleaming orichalc. From the box he took a great, red, many-faceted jewel. From it emanated a dazzling glow, which pulsed and shimmered and seemed to drip flakes of quivering golden fire on the trampled sands. This sparkling gem, Conan handed to Diviatix, who seized it as a drowning man might grasp at a helping hand.

As the druid took the jewel, the protective shield of golden light about them strengthened; a golden fire like that of the sun itself blazed up and smote the black magicians. They fell back shrieking; some pawed at their eyes, while others slumped in uncon-

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sciousness or death. The golden glory beat about the white-robed druid, who now seemed superhumanly tall and commanding. A wailing cry arose from the benches. Some black-clad forms struggled madly with each other, while some sought to flee by the smaller entrances on the far side.

"The Heart!" gasped Thoth-Amon, sinking back in his black throne with his face pale, drawn, and gaunt. Suddenly the great sorcerer looked like an old, old man.

"The Heart of Ahriman!" he said again.

Conan laughed heartily. "Thought you that I would venture into your den without the world's mightiest talisman? You must deem me still that raw, reckless, foolish youth who came out of the North forty years ago!

"For all these years, the Heart has slumbered in the vault of the Mitraeum. When the druid apprised me of your plot against it, I sent heralds to fetch both it and my son. With this amulet, old Diviatix has the power of a thousand of your wizards.

"That is why you so lusted for the gem—not to augment your own great magic, but to keep another from using it against you. That is why the Gods of the West drew this druid from his grove, hither across the wide world to the sandy wastes of shadow-haunted Stygia. No other white magician could stand against the temptation such power holds out to him who wields it—the power to make oneself a very god—save this drink-befuddled little man, this sanctified and holy vessel of the will of the gods!"

His visage curiously shrunken and pale, skull-like in the fierce golden fire that shone up from the figure of the druid, Thoth-Amon wilted. Of the lesser mages of the Black Ring, some lay dead or senseless; some gibbered and frothed in madness; some jammed the exits, clawing at one another in their frenzy to begone. Diviatix held up the mighty arch-talisman, which focused stupendous forces like a lens. Beam after beam of glory flashed across the arena, and with each bolt a wizard died.

By now, Thoth-Amon alone yet lived and had full possession of his faculties. Conan's nape prickled as he saw a shadow gathering about the Stygian—a clot of gloom, which wound about the sorcerer like the coils of a gigantic serpent. Had Father Set himself come to claim his chief votary? Thoth-Amon panted:

"You force me, against will and prudence, to play my masterstroke, dog of a Cimmerian!"

The shadowy coils about him darkened until he stood cloaked in utter gloom. Through this cloak of shadow, Thoth-Amon's eyes burned like glittering stars of dark fire. A chill passed over Conan as the Stygian uttered an enigmatic command in an unknown, guttural tongue. The human throat was never shaped to speak aloud that uncanny, bestial speech. The alien words reechoed back and forth across the shadowy immensity of the arena.

All eyes were drawn to the huge open portal at the farther end of the arena. Now something hulking and monstrous and unthinkable stirred to wakefulness beyond that yawning gulf of darkness. And Thoth-Amon laughed.

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11. *From the Black Gate.*

IT CAME FORTH SLOWLY from the abyss of darkness. At first Conan could not make it out, for it seemed but an extension of the darkness. But it was no insubstantial shadow, for the earth trembled beneath its ponderous tread.

"Crom!" muttered Conan between his teeth. His companions shrank back after one horrific glimpse of the moving shape.

"Gods, help us!" groaned Diviatix, "it is the living prototype of the Black Sphinx above! Earth was never meant to bear the weight of such a hell-spawned abomination. Think of the ages the accursed thing has dwelt here in the bowels of the black underworld! Now may the Lords of Light aid us, for not even the Heart of Ahriman can give me power over the Black Beast, the very child of Chaos itself!"

Conan raked the corpse-strewn benches with his eyes. None lived there; even Thoth-Amon had fled the coming-forth of the beast that his prayers had roused from its aeons of slumber.

"Back up the stair behind us!" Conan barked. "Give me that torch, Trocero! Stir yourselves, for the beast is upon us!"

They raced back the way they had come, up the broad stairway and along the lofty corridor that they had traversed before. As they ran, Conan looked about for narrow passages through which the black beast could not pursue them but found none. This vast hall would not delay the beast in the slightest; indeed, it might have been hewn from the rock for the monster's convenience.

Their only hope of escape lay at the further end, where they might or might not find a narrow exit. Sword in hand and boot heels thudding, the king of Aquilonia ran down the immense hallway, breathing a prayer to the cold, indifferent gods of his northern homeland.

THE CAMP had been crudely fortified with an embankment of baggage and sand, behind which crouched the spearmen of Gunderland, the knights of Aquilonia, and Poitain and the Bossonian archers. Whenever the swirling horde of Stygians came too close, the archers on signal rose and sent a volley of clothyard shafts whistling across the sands, now littered with corpses. The Bossonian longbows outranged the shorter weapons borne by the mounted Stygian archers. When the heavy Aquilonian shafts struck home, they pierced through mail and cloth and flesh to the vitals.

Pallantides, however, did not deceive himself about the desperate plight of his host. In the east, the faint glow of false morning paled the stars in that quarter. It would fade, but then the real dawn would arise. Without their horses, the Aquilonians could not defeat the mobile, mounted, and overwhelmingly more numerous Stygians. For the men to try to come to grips with their foes by toiling through the sand after them on foot would merely earn them all a quick demise.

The Aquilonians could hold their present position as long as their supplies held out, for the Stygians had no heavily armored men to break through the perimeter. But, with dawn, the

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Stygians would acquire a mighty ally: the desert sun. Even with the most careful rationing, the existing supplies of water would soon be drunk up, and men could not be sent down to the banks for the Bakhr to fetch more in the face of the foe.

Nor would the arrows of the Bossonians last forever. At the present rate, their quivers would be exhausted in an hour or two. The Stygians had only to keep circling the trapped army, showering its camp with their light but deadly shafts, and by the end of the day the Aquilonian force would be reduced to helplessness.

But the Stygians, it seemed, had other ideas. Unit by unit, the mounted archers drew off toward the Black Sphinx. They became mere bobbing black dots against the faintly paling sky and then disappeared behind the dunes.

When all had vanished from around the camp, Pallantides sent a soldier noted for his fleetness of foot out to scout. Stripped to shoes and breechclout, the man climbed the highest dune between the camp and the monument and ran back to report:

"Nay, general, they be not retreating. They be all gathered around that great ugly black statue, and their general's standing up on the rump of the critter, giving 'em a speech. Methinks they're getting ready for a grand charge; I seen what looks like a company of armored horsemen in that black mail they wear."

Pallantides turned to where his men, relaxing for the first time in hours, were eating hasty bites of cold breakfast. "We can stop some with our shafts and some with our pikes," he told Cenwulf and Amric, "but there are plenty more to take the place of these. We shall put our knights in the front rank, using their lances as pikes, since their armor is the best . . ."

But even as he spoke, he heard the hollowness of his own words and knew their chances were few.

And where was Conan?

12. The Black Beast Slays.

STONE GRATED. The mighty portal swung open in the breast of the Black Sphinx. Within the threshold towered Conan of Cimmeria, the light from the torch in his hand winking on his tunic of chain mail and flashing on the mirror surface of his naked sword. Behind him crowded Prince Conn, Count Trocero, and the druid Diviatix, who still bore the Heart of Ahriman in his fist.

Outside, the stars had dimmed in the east and the sky had visibly lightened. The colossal, doglike fore-limbs of the stony monster stretched away at slightly diverging angles from the body, each forepaw being twice the height of a man. Beyond them lay the dunes, sparsely spotted with camel thorn and tufts of dry grass.

Nothing moved in the angle between the forelimbs of the statue or in the visible desert beyond. From another direction, however, came the sounds of a large armed host: the creak of saddles, the clink of weapons, the nickering and stamping of horses, the grunts and bubblings of camels, the murmur of men. Over all these noises sounded the voice of the Stygian general, giving his units their orders and exhorting them to be

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valiant and destroy the filthy foreign worshipers of unclean gods. His harsh guttural voice resounded through the lightening gloom.

Conan cocked an ear back towards the portal. "It's after us," he breathed, as the ground trembled to the tread of the hyena-headed monster. "Thoth-Amon must have summoned the whole damned Stygian army. If we run for the camp, and they see us, 'twill be the last . . ."

The vibrations grew stronger. From the unseen host gathered around the rear of the Black Sphinx came trumpet calls and the rumble of kettle drums. The Stygians were on the move.

"Follow me," murmured Conan, thrusting his torch, which now bore only a small, smoky flame, into the sand to extinguish it.

The king led his comrades along the path between the diverging forelimbs of the statue. Behind them, a moving shape of darkness appeared in the opening in the sphinx's breast. At the mouth of the great shaft that led down to immemorial crypts appeared a shape of living horror, leering and slavering. Huge as half a hundred lions, it peered into the darkness and sniffed the pre-dawn air.

A glance behind them sent Conan and his comrades scurrying. "That gully! Over there!" growled Conan, pointing. "Mayhap it won't see us."

They dashed to the gully that he had indicated and crouched, scarcely daring to breathe. The monster shambled out on their track, just as the Stygian host, with much drumming and trumpeting, began to move. The first units passed the left paw of the statue, to find themselves riding parallel to the monster and only a few yards from it.

One Stygian, uttered an exclamation; then others; then shouts of terror and amazement filled the night. Bowstrings twanged, and a shower of arrows and javelins fell about the monster. These missiles were mere pin pricks to so vast a creature, but they stuck in its hide and roused it to fury.

It wheeled ponderously toward the host and for an instant towered over them, like the living cub of the stone monster it resembled. Then it was among them! Its great paws swept right and left, dashing men and mounts head over heels in a welter of gore. The Black Beast waded through the slaughter, dipping its huge head with every stride to snatch up a Stygian and crunch him to jelly with one bite. The air was hideous with the shrieking of mangled horses, the agony and terror of broken men.

The Stygians did not lack courage. Horrified though he was, their general ordered one desperate charge. The beast swept his men to earth with its slashing paws and snapping jaws as fast as they came within reach. At last the Stygians went mad with terror, clawing and trampling one another in their haste to flee. Most of them were dismounted by the frantic leaps and buckings of their terrified horses and camels and had to slog through the sand afoot. And after them came the Black Beast, trampling and crunching. Ever it slew—and slew—and slew.

AS THE SUN's golden disc lifted above the desert beyond the Bakhr, the monster returned from its slaughter. It

(Cont. on page 117)

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IRON MOUNTAIN

Gordon Eklund has already fulfilled much of the promise that was implicit in his first published story ("Dear Aunt Annie," April, 1970), and as this issue is being put together Doubleday has just published his novel, Beyond the Resurection *(which was serialized here last year). Now he offers a quiet story about an old Chinese man and a city robbed of almost all life . . .*

GORDON EKLUND

Illustrated by JOE STATON

WHEN HE AWOKE on the fourth morning following the day when he had found and invaded the last room with its last scattering of canned food, Chou Lun Chu knew that he would now have to leave the hotel and venture into the outer world. If he remained here, he knew, he would surely suffer the slow undignified death of starvation, for there wasn't a scrap of food left in the hotel; the careful search he had conducted the past three days had convinced him of that. The few tins of concentrated juice he had found in that last room far upstairs in a tiny hidden pocket of that hotel had run out yesterday. So now, waking, having elected to cling to the last vestiges of mortal life, with a pale trickle of light dripping into the tiny room from its single soiled window, which faced the rear of yet another hotel building behind, Chou forced himself off the hard mattress and into his newest and cleanest and shiniest blue suit. He owned five suits: three blue and two gray. So far this morning his belly had not yet begun to hurt him, but he knew that pain would surely come later. It had been more than a week since he had last consumed solid food. Chou was a man intimately familiar with all the various symptoms of hunger. Often in the past, he had gone this long or even longer without eating, but oddly the pain seemed much more intense this time than he could ever remember it. Last night, he had barely been able to move about, even with the juice he had drunk. But he had not been this old before. He was eighty now. He knew that was old.

The greater problem, however, was not food, it was water. The taps had ceased running months ago and he had drunk nothing since then except juice and beer and Coca-cola. His throat was as dry as the strange black cloud that

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hovered constantly over the city now, hiding the sun even at noon. It was fortunate there was no one about with whom to converse, for he was certain he could not have managed to utter a word with his tongue this raw and swollen. No, the choice was clear enough: if he wanted to live, he must go out. For water, if nothing else.

But, somehow, he couldn't seem able to concentrate fully upon his own miseries, for his mind was still filled with the visions of a certain dream he had had last night and many nights before. There was an old Chinese legend which told of a great iron mountain that stretched higher than the highest clouds and high upon the peak of this great mountain lived the great white bird, a creature as large as an elephant and as graceful as a dove. The gods, when seeking marriage, would come together to the iron mountain, climbing long upon the cold hard slopes, to seek the blessings of the great bird. There, upon the shining peak of the mountain, where the sun glowed like a great golden fire, the bird would fall from the highest point of the sky.

Chou did not know what happened then, for he always awoke too soon.

Done dressing, he removed a soiled black plastic comb from his pants pocket and tried to part his hair carefully in the middle. The part did not feel right to his touch, so he decided to go down to the washroom and its cracked mirror so that he could be certain of putting on his best appearance for the unknown dangers that lurked outside.

The corridor beyond his room, as always during the past weeks, was silent and empty. The withered cracked gray

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paint hung down from the walls and ceiling in long flaking strips. The dust circulated thickly through the stale air. It was a brief walk to the washroom and he went straight in, going to the nearest and dirtiest of the four sinks. Tentatively, he turned the cold water tap. A spray of dry rust dripped from the spigot, staining the already brown porcelain. Raising his comb, Chou parted his hair, proudly observing in the mirror above the sink the almost total absence of white in his hair. When he was done, gripping the edge of the sink, he studied his own reflection more carefully, the wrinkled yellow-brown skin, the small puckered gray eyes. But there was nothing here he had not already seen in the past eighty years. Slowly, he left the washroom, not caring to leave its familiar terrain too rapidly. Chou had been a resident of this hotel for ten years now, ever since his grandson, who called himself Tony Chow, had brought him here from Hong Kong. In truth, Chou knew little of this new country beyond the walls of the hotel itself. He knew it was called San Francisco and it was part of America. One afternoon, he recalled, Tony Chow had taken him to the ocean and had pointed far off across the eternally gray water, saying, "There, Grandfather. Way out there. All the way across the water. That's where China is." Chou had merely snorted at the boy, his youthful pretensions. He himself had journeyed all the way across that ocean. He certainly knew where China was. But Tony Chow was gone now. Sometimes, thinking back, Chou almost regretted not having gone too. But he was really too old to change his ways. The open land far distant from the cities where Tony had wanted to make him go—there were too many bad memories out there. So he had chosen to stay here. And die?

Now, returning to the corridor, he was sorely tempted to search the hotel one more time. There had to be some food here somewhere. But he knew that would only be delaying his fate. If he had missed finding any food thus far, in spite of three months of constant and careful searching, he would not be apt to discover it now. Continuing down the corridor, he nodded at the doors as he passed. He remembered that Chan had occupied this room and Tong that one ever there and Choi this other. All were gone now. Only Yang Tai had remained as long as Chou, and Yang was gone now too; he was dead.

That had been a month ago. The last time Chou had gone outside. The black cloud had been awful that day, and although it was almost noon, neither man had been able to see as much as ten feet ahead. Yang had said that morning, "I have saved money from my last check. We shall have food, my friend. I will buy it." This was before Chou had discovered the small stock of canned food hidden in the basement and Yang, who was less familiar with hunger than Chou, had already been afraid of death. So they went out that day, making their cautious way through the dark street, going to the Goy Fat Market at the corner. The shelves still held a few scattered cans of food—mostly greens—but the two of them just stood there, uncertain what to do. Shouting, Yang called upon the old proprietor, but both men knew he had surely left with the

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others. That was when the boys had leaped at them out of the dark shelves, flying through the air like bright yellow demons. Chou clearly remembered his own fear. Screaming, he had tuned and run, streaking out the open door, but Yang had been less quick, less fortunate. Chou saw him fall, then saw the flash of the silver knife. He ran faster. Even now, the shame of that occasion stayed deeply with him. Often he felt it was the shame which had kept him indoors so long more than the fear. He remembered how he had fallen to his knees in front of the hotel, his lungs burning with a black fire, still screaming, crying, weeping, crawling desperately ahead, his hands scratching and clawing at raw concrete. There had been no pursuit—he was safe. Reaching his room, he had gone to a dark corner and there knelt down, weeping bitter tears for Yang and for his own powerful private shame. Why, he wondered, as a man of eighty years did he fear death so much more powerfully than he had as a young soldier fighting the Japanese invaders in Manchuria? Or even as a man of fifty in the streets of Hong Kong? He had been a truly courageous man once, a strong young man standing almost six feet in height with great powerful shoulders and a young and beautiful and obedient bride. He had never shed a single tear in his life—not then—and he would march miles with the army and never display a sign of fatigue. He had slain the enemy without mercy and he had loved his wife dearly. She had died in 1940, in Shanghai—a bombing raid. And now here he was—fifty years later—the once mighty warrier reduced to a quivering shrunken husk of a dying and fearful old man.

Thrusting back his shoulders, Chou spun down the stairs, hurrying into the battered and broken lobby. Here dust grew everywhere as thick as leaves in a forest. The silence was total. He stepped carefully through the debris, heading directly for the outer door. He tried to remember if the lobby had changed from the last time. This torn and cracked chair—was it new or did he remember it from a month ago? Or this broken colorful glass strewn across the floor? Or these empty tins of food? Often during the month he had spent alone, he had heard noises in the building. Even voices. One time a hand had pounded upon the door of his room and rattled the knob violently. He had been afraid that time too. Always afraid. But now his fear was at an end: it had to be: he was going out at last.

The outer door had long since been separated from its hinges, so Chou merely stepped straight ahead and soon found himself standing upon the sidewalk. The black cloud was more immense than he remembered it, the edges of the impenetrable fog holding closely to the street. And there was an odor too: an ugly foul smell like dirt and soot. Like burning coal. Past the cloud, Chou could vaguely see the rusting frames of the deserted motor cars stalled along the street or the broken neon lights above which had once played bright colorful games up and down this narrow avenue. But everything was gone now—the lights, the cars, the people—both white and yellow—who had formerly thronged here. Everything was either broken or

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else extinguished. Chou stood alone, listening attentively for the sounds of life, but the silence was total. Turning in a random direction, he moved away. As he did, he realized the direction he had chosen would take him past the Goy Fat Market where Yang had died. He felt his fear returning and rising. Would the boys be there again? If they saw him, would they kill him?

It had always been bad in this city, San Francisco. Truth to tell, Chou had never liked it here. In Honk Kong—even, years ago, in Shanghai—there had been much fighting and violence, but it was much worse here. Not just the Chinese boys, but the whites and blacks would come down into the neighborhood too. He remembered that Yang Tai had twice been robbed by gangs of boys, his money taken when his wallet was full from his monthly check. After the second time, he had ceased carrying money in his pockets—only what he needed—but the boys had stopped him again and thrown him down and kicked him. Chou had never been bothered. He had seldom gone out and never at night. Only during the day. Three or four times a week, he went to the market, and twice a month to the Chinese movies. Also, once a year he ventured all the way to Jackson Street at the corner of Stockton where the tailor, Franklin Louie, a man even older than Chou, kept his small shop. A new suit each year, blue alternating with gray, paying cash in advance with the money he had saved from his monthly checks during the past year. Sometimes Long Moi, who operated the hotel, would come and say that they wished to speak with him downtown and then Chou would ride the bus to the big brick office and speak with the Chinese girl. She was very young and dressed so finely, so splendidly, that he had once complimented her in very fulsome phrases which made him feel embarrassed whenever he recalled them afterward.

Reaching the sidewalk outside the market, he stopped. Now that he had actually gone out, he realized there was still one question he had failed to consider: what was he going to do now? In the great burst of pride resulting from the courageousness of his actions, he had almost forgotten his hunger and thirst. Staring at the open door to the market, where only a month ago he had seen food sitting on neat shelves, his hunger returned to assault him brutally. He would have to go inside. He could not pass up this possibility of nourishment. But what if that gang were still there? The boys. It wasn't simply fear. He did not want to die by the knife. During the war, he had killed a Japanese general and captured his sword, its blade longer than a big man's leg. He had kept the sword many years, finally selling it in Hong Kong to the old shopowner. He had been very hungry that time too—it was just before Tony Chow had sent for him—but he was much hungrier now.

Going carefully to the open door of the market, he peered in, putting his head around the corner, staring deeply into the dark recessed places. As far as he could see, the shelves were quite bare, but because of the dark cloud, he could only see within a few yards of the door. Farther inside—deeper—there might well be food waiting. Yes, he

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thought, food—but what else?

He made his shoulders go back, straightened his spine till it was as stiff and straight as a sword. Then proudly, with great dignity, Chou marched into the store. He took one step, then another. Always one at a time. The door wavered behind him, faded. He stopped. Listened.

Then he laughed. Each heaving burst of laughter rattled as loudly as gunfire but he would not stop; he kept laughing. It was all right. There was no one here—he was sure—nothing to fear. Going straight ahead, he glanced behind the counter, saw nothing, then inspected the shelves one by one. In a dark corner, he found a handful of stale moldering crumbs—bread, probably—but that was all. The store had been cleaned out.

He sat down on the floor, tucking his knees underneath him. Now what was he to do? After all this trouble and torment, all the fear, and he had found nothing.

Then he remembered: the old proprietor. He and his family had lived upstairs above the store. Behind the counter, there was a door. Perhaps he would find forgotten food in their quarters. Standing, he moved toward the door. It was pitch dark here. He had to feel the stairs with the tips of his toes. He could not see his own hands as they moved against the rough wood of the walls. Then his foot, coming down, struck something. There was a sharp cracking noise, like a twig breaking in the woods. He stopped, crouched down and felt with his hands. He touched something moist, then something smooth and brittle. He felt: it was narrow, long, then another moist place. Then, as if a wind had suddenly been aroused, the odor reached his nostrils. It was faint—dull—but he gagged, knowing it. As a soldier, he had smelled this odor too often before. Jumping straight up, he turned, nearly toppling, vaulting down the stairs, barely holding his balance, screaming. The smell of death pursued him through the store, out into the empty street. What he had touched up there—feeling with his own hands—it had been a dead man. A human skeleton: the flesh ripped from the bones.

It had been Yang, he was sure.

In the street, he could not make himself stop running. Plunging across the concrete, the black mists swirling around him, suddenly he slammed against the side of an abandoned car, spun away, fell at last.

Holding his head in his hands, he lay there weeping.

Then he felt the cool soothing touch of a hand upon his forehead.

"Hey. Are you all right?" she said. "Is something wrong in there? What? A gang? A ghost?"

Chou looked up, meeting her pale blue eyes briefly, then he dropped his gaze hastily. She was nearly undressed, with only a narrow wispy cloth band—like the torn end of a shirt—wrapped around her waist. And young too, he had seen.

What could she possibly want with him?

His English was poor. He could understand the language better than he could speak it. Here in America he had rarely been called upon to use it. But now he tried. "I am Chou," he said.

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"And—and hungry . . . thirsty." He pointed at her waist, unable to conceal his anguish; he had seen the canteen dangling there.

"Chow? Hungry? Oh, you mean that's your name. Here, I'll give you something. Why don't you stand up?"

With the help of her hand, he stood, leaning against the side of the car to stop his knees from shaking. Her hair was trimmed short, like a boy's. Her breasts were tiny too, funnel-like, exceedingly white. He cautioned himself that he had seen such things before—during bad times—during the war, very often.

"Here," she said, passing him the canteen. "And this too." Reaching to her skirt—if that was what it was—she opened a pocket and removed a small flat can, passing it to him. Pressing the canteen to his swollen lips, Chou drank deeply. The water was incredibly sweet, though hot; very good. The can contained sardines. He opened the tin, using the screw fastened to the back side.

"They may be spoiled," she cautioned.

Chou shook his head to indicate that he did not care. First, he put the edge of the tin tenderly against his lips and swallowed the juices. The taste of mustard sauce was like fire on his tongue. Then he swallowed the tiny fragrant fishes, chewing them tastefully, knowing he received the greatest benefit by eating slowly.

As he ate, the girl laughed. "I hope they don't make you sick. I can get us more, but I've been afraid to eat them myself. You can speak English, can't you?" she asked, having forgotten his previous words.

He said, "Tell me your name, young lady."

She laughed again, the sound containing an ominous tone upon this empty street, surrounded by the broken husks of the cars, the thick black fog.

"Why didn't you leave with the others?" she asked.

"I no want to live way out there," said Chou. "As a boy I live in the country. Work all the time. Pick rice. War come—many die. My wife." He made a crescendo motion with his hands. "She blow up. I say no."

"Me, too," the girl said. "You know what? I like it here. I was in jail but I got away and stayed. Even with this smog, this rot. The rest went to the mountains but not me and I've done all right. But they say we'll all die here. I don't know."

Chou shook his head, uncomprehending. Why did she speak of death when one man's life had so recently been preserved? Tony Chow had also spoken of death, wanting him to leave. Tony had forced him to look at the television, with its white gaping hollow faces and all the words running together, saying death, death, death. Chou had never liked the television.

"I think I'm immune," the girl said. "I've been here three months since everybody was supposed to get out. I've seen some who stayed just keel over and die. Not me—I feel fine."

"They kill Yang," Chou said. "And take his flesh."

"Cannibals. Yes, oh yes. There for a while, that was common. I never had to do that." She tapped her forehead. "Just by using my head, I can find bet-

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ter food. I hope you're not afraid I'll eat you."

"No. You I like. I trust."

"Good, good," laughing once more. She pointed in the opposite direction from where Chou had come. "I'm going that way. There's a place, a building where I want to go. Sometimes, from the very top, you can see the sun through the cloud. Want to come?"

"Yes, I come."

"Fine." She wrapped a comradely arm around his shoulders, smiling joyfully, and led him up the street, winding together through the maze of the abandoned cars. The girl stood a good six inches taller than Chou and wore loose rubber-thonged sandals on her feet. She gazed at Chou's carefully polished black shoes and wrinkled her brow. "You sure are a sight," she said.

Later, as they began to leave the streets he knew most familiarly, Chou said, "Tell me your name please, young lady." Their progress so far had not been rapid. The girl had often stopped to drink from the canteen, sometimes sharing the water with Chou. Several times, coughing fits had suddenly come over her and once, racked by the heaving of her own lungs, she had fallen to her hands and knees on the pavement.

"My name is Jean," she said.

"I am Chou."

"Oh, yes. I remember."

Later, as the buildings around them suddenly grew, bursting into huge tall spindly thrusting masses of glass and steel that rose impossibly high into the sky, disappearing abruptly inside the black cloud, Jean said, "I bet you don't really know what happened, do you?"

"I know everybody go away. Go to the mountains to live where the air is clean and they do not die."

"That's part of it," she said. "But let me tell you. I was in jail when a lot of it happened but I heard. Here in the city it started with this huge fantastic traffic jam. Every car in the city stopped one morning—the freeways and bridges were clogged—and they just sat there on the streets all day—nobody would do anything about it—tossing their filth up into the sky. It was a hundred and five degrees that day, second hottest day in the city's history. Then there was a riot down at Hunter's Point. Fires burning out of control everywhere. And another—a real ugly one—in the Mission. Nobody would move their cars. A lot were left with their engines running, God knows why. People just walked away and some school children died from the smog. Then more. The death toll reached a thousand. In the jail, I could hardly breathe. The factories kept perking—they couldn't shut them down without a court order and the judge wanted to hear the arguments—extra buses were brought in to ensure that people would make it to work on time. It was just awful. And stupid too. Finally, two days after it had begun, when nothing had improved, they said everybody had to leave. It was the same as New York three years ago and Chicago last year and L.A. even before that and they wanted to start evacuating before it got impossible. This city was about the last big one to go, you know. But finally it was over; nobody could live here any more, they said. They let us out of jail

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that night, but there was so much confusion, I just skipped away. They had a place in Colorado where everybody was going to be relocated, but I thought the heck with that. This city was going to be all mine—I've never lived anywhere else my whole life—and there for a time, I'm telling you, that's exactly the way it was. You should've seen me, Chou. The first day I went to all the big hotels—the Mark Hopkins and the Hilton and all of them—and slept in all the big suites, just like a king or a president. Somebody tried to kill me that night, but I got him first. I keep a knife taped to my leg and I know how to use it. I hate to kill but I don't like dying either. Then I slept up in Coit Tower—all the way up on the observation level—stayed there for the longest time, but it got boring after a while—you couldn't see anything because of the black cloud—so I went to the park and slept under the big trees. I had one of the buffalos for a pet till some marauders snuck in and shot him while I wasn't looking. There was a kid who stayed with me for a couple weeks—I found him wandering around one day lost—a little Mexican boy—but he kept coughing—I don't think he ever was very strong—never wanted to go anywhere—just sat in the park all day staring at the lakes—and one morning he just died. Never woke up. I buried him. I've been alone ever since. You used to see big gangs roaming the streets—tons of them—but I guess they had to give up. I haven't seen hardly a soul in the last two, three weeks. A plane flew over then, dropping leaflets. Same old stuff: get out, get out, death is coming for you. So now there's just you and me, Chou. Tell me how you like it."

Chou had only understood a small portion of what she'd said, but now he attempted to share his own experiences with her. How he had lived these many weeks in fear and dread, alone, afraid to leave the hotel, stealing food from the abandoned rooms.

"That wasn't right," Jean said. "You should have done what I did. Live your life for the living. This city is really a grand place. Even like it is now, I love it." She must have noticed the sadness in his eyes, for suddenly, smiling, she patted his shoulders kindly. "Hey, I didn't mean anything against you. I can see that you're not young. You couldn't fight. But now you can do it. I'll help. You've got me to watch over you now."

They had come quite far. The great tall buildings, rising everywhere, made the street almost as dark as night, the hovering towers cutting off even the faint light of the hidden sun. As they walked, Jean and Chou clutched each other's hands.

"Where we're going is right over there," Jean said, starting to point. "But—hey wait. What's this? In here a second." She pointed him toward a tiny dwarfed single-story building located between two of the highest towers. They went inside. It was a clothing store—women's clothing. Tall sleek mannequins stood lightly about the room, proudly displaying their splendid wardrobes. Unable to see clearly, Chou went from rack to rack, touching the fine smooth female fabrics. He inspected each of the mannequins in turn, admiring the way their skirts and gowns clung tightly to their pale dead

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flesh.

When he turned, he saw that Jean was naked, but he met her gaze firmly, quite unashamed, and she handed him her knife, the canteen and two tins of sardines. He put everything into the pockets of his suit except the canteen, which he fastened to his belt.

"This would be the last place anyone would ever think of looting. I bet nothing has been touched. Now you stay here and watch me." She disappeared into the mists at the back of the store and, a brief moment later, reappeared, her arms filled with overflowing whiteness. Quickly, as Chou admiringly watched, she dressed. When she was done, the long white gown fell from her throat to her ankles. She adjusted the veil, shielding her eyes.

"Now tell me how I look," she said, turning on her heels so that he could see all of her.

"Oh, very fine." He clapped his hands delightedly. "Oh, very fine."

Jean, in her wedding gown, bowed to him from the waist.

"Now something for you." Carefully, she went and scanned the many racks, rejecting various garmets, selecting others only to discard them later. She had nearly reached the end of her search when she stopped and gave a gleeful yelp. "Perfect!" She held it up so that Chou could see. It was a purple velvet dressing gown, inscribed with images of fire-breathing dragons and various peaceful Chinese settings.

She had him put it on over his suit. Understanding without having to be told, Chou removed his shoes and socks and stood barefooted.

Jean came forward, her gown rustling against her ankles, and pressed her lips gently to his wrinkled forehead. "You look wonderful. Now, come."

They went out together, crossing the wide street, slipping obliviously between the dead cars. Across the way, they entered the open lobby of one of the tall towers.

"It's sixty stories," Jean said. "We'll have to take it slowly. I come here pretty often. To see the sun."

They passed through the lobby, which was filled with torn shredded paintings and broken mutilated furniture. The thick green carpet, though cut and torn in many places, weaved like fine whispering grass around Chou's bare ankles. The stairs twisted and turned, rising upward into invisibility. Cold gray concrete stood everywhere—no windows. Slowly and purposively, they began to climb. The second floor. The fifth. The fifteenth. At the twentieth, Jean slipped and fell and Chou caught her around the waist and boosted her to the safety of the stair landing. She began to cough furiously. He pressed the canteen fearfully to her lips.

"Fine," she said at last, pushing him away.

Higher, higher. It was like a dream. The legend of the iron mountain. Where the great white bird lives. The gods come to seek the blessings of the bird. Climbing endlessly upon the cold hard slopes. And then, upon the peak, where the sun glows like a golden fire, the bird comes down from the pale sky above.

Higher, higher.

At last, they reached the top. Chou

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Jay Haldeman made his professional debut in these pages with "Garden of Eden" (December, 1971), and followed it with "Watchdøg" in our companion magazine (AMAZING SCIENCE FICTION, *May, 1972). Neither story will prepare you adequately for the essay into surreality which he has titled—*

WHAT I DID ON MY SUMMER VACATION

JACK C. HALDEMAN II

Illustrated by DON JONES

THE WATER FEELS GOOD. It is hot and the room is filling up with steam. If I look around the edge of the shower curtain, I can see that the mirror is sweating. My problems wash off with the soapy water, and I wonder why I am in someone else's room.

There are parties going on in other parts of the hotel. After I shower and shave and get dressed I will try to find them. I have some room numbers written on the back of my nametag. It is pinned to my shirt, lying in a puddle on the white-tiled floor, getting wet.

A blurred figure is standing on the other side of the dripping curtain. It is a moment before I realize he has walked in. The curtain bulges and I feel his outstretched palm through the slippery plastic as he shoves me against the wall. He is wearing a uniform of some sort. My head cracks against the tiled wall. I think he is a hotel employee.

My reaction is guilt. Why? What have I done? Yes. This is someone else's room. That must be it.

Think about the worn key on the green plastic holder with the raised room number on the front and the return address on the back. Think of it crowded in there with my change and my key ring and shards of loose pipe tobacco.

I sputter with water in my eyes and nose and mouth. The water is way too hot and I can hardly breathe.

"I'm registered in the hotel." Guilt is turning to anger. What does he mean, breaking in here like this?

"Look in my pants over there, you'll find my room key. I'm here with my wife. With the convention." I turn my head which is hurting and manage to catch a steamy breath.

His left hand swings around and hits my side three point five inches below

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my ribs, just above my hip bone. The curtain rips loose at one end and I can see, as I fall, that he is young. About eighteen, I estimate as my nose clips the edge of the tub, bursting with a red splash that my forehead, as it follows my nose, spreads in a broad smear across the inside wall of the tub.

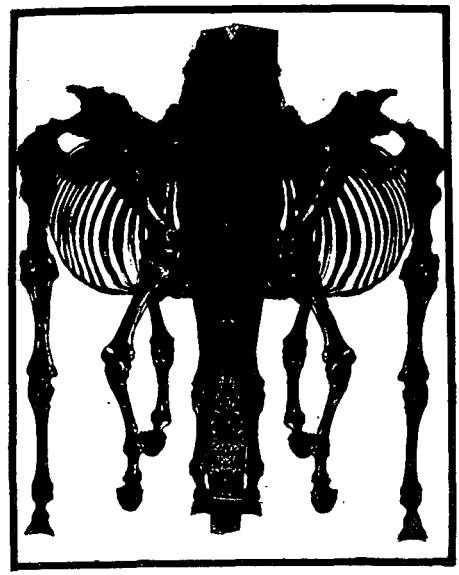
I am confident that I will be able to overpower him, but first I will have to get up from the bottom of the tub. As I am too weak, dazed, he solves the problem for me by grabbing my left arm and pulling me over the edge onto the floor. Hearing the red water go down the drain in a small whirlpool, I am suddenly aware that the floor is cold.

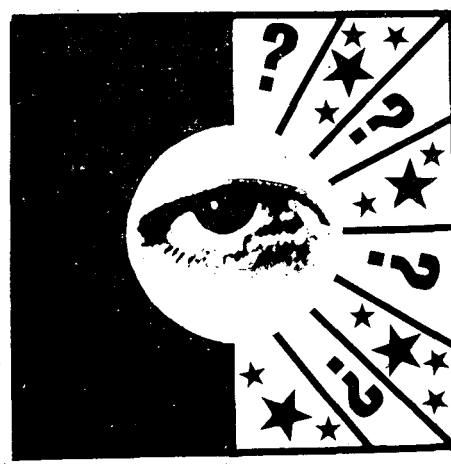
He is hurting me, holding me by the neck with his thumbs digging into my windpipe and raising and lowering my head rapidly against the sticky tile floor. He is doing this with considerable force and my head is making uncomfortable squishing sounds as it hits.

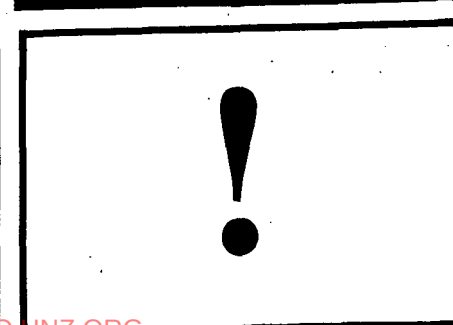
So I think I'll scream.

The loudness of my voice surprises me as it blocks out all the other noises. *Is the water still running in the shower? Is it still red?* Although my diaphragm is doing most of the work (along with that cute little tube that curves up from inside me and empties into the back of my mouth), the muscles on my face form hard little ridges as they tense and pull the flesh away from my now bared teeth. It is an interesting pattern.

My parasympathetic nervous system slows down. This is no time to worry about digesting the chicken I had for dinner. I sacrifice intestinal movement to gear my body for skeletal muscle control, which is more advantageous in







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situations such as this.

My blood vessels are contracting, sending the bulk of my blood down into the deep, dark places to hide. My liver is one of the favorite places—so warm and deep black red.

Adrenalin is coursing through my body and I can just barely hear the pounding of blood past my ear drum over the echoing scream I am still producing. When I listen to the blood in my ear I wonder about all those little white blood cells swimming around with their even smaller red brothers. What do they do in a fight? Maybe they hide in my liver. There's lots of room there.

There are changes of electrical potential at the synapses of the neurons in my brain. A chemical reaction produces an electrical reaction which produces a physical reaction. The physical reaction is complex, but aided by an old Master Sergeant who is dead now *most of him is in a hole in Viet Nam and the rest of him is still in the air and I'm waiting for it to come down.*

Through some unconscious lesson he must have once whispered in my ear, I know what to do and am doing it before I can think much about it.

Faster than the speeding bullet that tore off Jeff's head and made grey jelly out of his dreams of becoming a news reporter. Faster than the good old speed of light. *Funny, I can see him standing there, still standing there with his headless body and I feel the* snap *as his lifeline is broken and his body starts to fold and all the unborn children will stay unborn and their children will stay unborn and so on forever. A long string of unborn people crying out in anguish as they lose their chance in a split second. I was so glad it was him and not me that I cried at night for years.* Really fast, my left hand receives the correct electrical impulses that pull the tendons that curl my knuckles over, digging my fingernails into my palm which moves forward as I unbend my elbow, extending my arm in a single rapid motion which is only slightly slowed as I contact his nose at the proper angle, feeling the cartilage crumble and slide back into his brain.

I am surprised at what my right hand has been doing all this time. It contacts his neck at the end of a large arc, striking him an instant after my left hand has killed him. The force vector, as reliable in fighting as in billiards and physics, snaps his head around, spraying blood all over me and I am sitting in an overstuffed black chair, rocking back and forth.

A baby is crying. Mine? It is not true that parents can always recognize their own children by their sounds. I look around to see which one is making all the noise. It is Joyce's little girl, who always looks so silly when she cries. I watch her for awhile, because it is more interesting than the TV in front of us.

It seems like nobody is going to stop her from crying, so I guess I'd better do something before George hears her and tosses her across the room, bouncing her limp body against the wall with the faded rose print paper. I'm just kidding, he wouldn't do that. But then again, you never can tell what George might do.

I start over to pick her up but I am distracted by another baby that is

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playing with an ashtray in the middle of the floor. He is eating the filters and this strikes me as pretty funny so I turn to tell his mother, but I forget what I was going to say, so I pick him up instead. They are all watching TV, anyway.

He cries when I pick him up so I decide that he wants me to help him walk around. I stand behind him and bend over, offering two fingers which he takes for support. We toddle awkwardly along in the dark room like some clumsy, misshapen, fourlegged beast.

As we work our way up the short flight of stairs, I am struck by how much this looks like our old house. But everything is laid out backward and a little different, as if someone took the plans to our old house and copied them from a warped mirror. I start to tell my wife about this, but I forget what I was going to say and we keep lumbering up the stairs.

This is the way it was when I was very small and the world was full of giants who spoke very loudly and did incomprehensible, alien things. And now I am one of them—the giant aliens—and as I look down at the little one in front of me I wonder what he is wondering about.

At the top of the stairs is one of those wooden gates that parents use rather than barbed wire. A light blond, hand-rubbed baby trap. I pick the kid up and swing him over. Since I am much larger than he is, I am able to step over it with no trouble. He is tired of walking and decides to sit and vomit for a while.

I lower myself back on my heels and we both stare at the vomit. It's not bad for a kid. He looks proud and starts to play with the tobacco that is floating around in it. He makes a second pile and sets it along side of the other one. I applaud and he smiles and drools at me. One of his ears is bigger than the other.

I soon get tired of watching him play in the vomit and he shows no signs of getting interested in anything else. He wasn't even distracted by my key chain that I waved in front of him. Babies usually like my key chain because it has no keys on it, only a fingernail clipper that doesn't work and a plastic-encased photograph of my insurance agent swinging by a hole punched in his forehead.

So I figure I might as well tell his mother that he is sitting here throwing up. Mothers often like to know about these things. But as I walk back down the stairs I am once again struck by how much this doesn't look like our old house and I keep on walking, feet slapping on the cold, bloody tiles, until I get to my chair and sit down to watch the TV.

The fellow sitting next to me leans over and whispers in my ear that he is from Texas so I ask him in a loud voice why. "Why not?" he whispers back, further involving me in some unknown conspiracy. So I think it over and I can't find even one good reason why not so I let it drop and turn to see if I am blocking my wife's view.

She smiles at me and I get this *everything is all right* feeling that she can transmit better than anyone else. So I turn back around to watch the show. It is about Texas.

At the third commercial I remember

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right in the middle of the deodorant that I had forgotten to tell somebody's mother something that I just forgot but it doesn't matter because he's not there either and there are no chairs and no walls and the road is covered with snow.

"Look at this," they shout at me.

I turn and they are standing at the edge of the road over the still-twitching body of a rather large animal. Even though it is dead I am sure it has a lot of meanness left.

I start to walk toward them when it dawns on me what all that twitching meanness is.

"Don't you know better than to kill a wolverine?" I holler. "They are mean as hell and always travel in pairs." I learned this from a National Geographic I once thumbed through in a musty basement.

On my right a wolverine as big as a wolf steps out from the woods. I don't really know how big wolverines are because I can't remember the pictures in the magazine but this one is huge and the white fangs right underneath his red eyes are pointing straight at me.

If I wasn't at a movie I'd be scared as hell right now. Funny how the wrap-around screen wraps all around me. Three hundred sixty degrees, as a matter of fact, give or take one or two. This is all too real and I want to grip hard on the edge of my seat, but there is no seat around, just snow and trees and some white mountains off in the distance and a very angry wolverine bounding towards me. I can't help wondering if this is Texas.

So I close my eyes and think of popcorn in a wax cup that the butter has made all slippery. I even think of ice cream sandwiches, Milk Duds, and flat orange drink in little square wax containers. None of this helps me at all as I feel the rush of air and smell the deep animal odor as the wolverine leaps right past me, distracted at the last moment.

What distracted the wolverine at the last moment was my good friends down the road who are shouting very loudly.

What they are shouting goes something like "Look at this."

They are still standing next to the still twitching body of the other wolverine. I wonder if they have moved at all and then I realize that they are caught in an endless cassette of programmed reality, stuck forever in a looping moment.

"Look at this." They say. Of course.

The wolverine is standing next to them sniffing. He reaches the same conclusion that I did and he turns to make another pass at me.

I believe that he feels sorry for them and is showing it by not eating them.

"Look at this," they say. What else?

I close my eyes because he is going to get me this time and I can't move my feet and I'd rather not watch myself getting eaten if I have the option.

His footbeats are unusually loud and I can hear them stop as he leaps. I decide I might as well watch myself getting eaten. After all, it would be a shame to miss the last act.

As I open my eyes the credits flash in front of them. This surprises me because the credits are usually at the beginning. How unusual, I think.

"Look at this," says the man who isn't sitting next to me.

The credits are black ink on a

(Cont. on page 91)

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THE SON OF BLACK MORCA

ALEXEI & CORY PANSHIN

Black Morca was dead! Struck down not by the hand of an enemy without, but by his own people, his head impaled upon a pole for all to see. But what of Haldane, his son, his hope, the embodiment of his dreams for glory? What of Haldane, wounded in mind and body, knowing no one for a friend?

(Second of Three Parts)

Illustrated by JEFF JONES

SYNOPSIS

PART I: ESCAPE

The simple easy world of a boy of sixteen has been broken in a minute.

HALDANE is the one son of BLACK MORCA, War King of the Gets and as much of a ruler as the ancient land of Nestor can boast. In Haldane's grandfather's time, the Gets had swept into the West and there met the warriors and the wizards of the Western lands of Chastain, Palsance and Vilicea in the Battle of Stone Heath. With Ultimate Spells, the Western wizards had sent the Gets in retirement to Nestor and destroyed themselves, for magic takes a price and the price of the Ultimate Spells is death for a wish.

Morca is a man of hairy ambition. He seeks to enlarge his dun, his hill fort. He, among all the magic-fearing Gets, keeps a wizard. He ignores all the old Gettish ways and makes new practice. He seeks to unite the wild Get barons behind him and to take the Western lands from South Cape to the Hook, from Orkay to Grelland, from Lake Lamorne to the sea. He would become king of the Gets after Western fashion—no, more than a king. He would become the Lord of the Get Empire. And he would make Haldane his lieutenant and his heir.

The world of Haldane is smaller than the world of Morca. Haldane has been raised in the safe confines of Morca's dreams. He knows little more than Morca's dun and the country close by. He knows Nestorians as cattle, as peasants, as serfs. He knows Gets as barons and carls. He knows no Gettish women—since Haldane's mother, Freda, died in a fall, Morca has kept a celibate hall. Haldane is made of more common-seeming stuff than great Morca, who is larger than life. He would follow his father if he were allowed and if he had any clear idea how he might. But it is his secret grief that Morca is as rough and bluff with him in private as he is in public, even though he speaks of

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Haldane as "lieutenant." And he makes promises to Haldane and breaks them lightly.

It is late afternoon of a cool day in mid-spring, a Libera's Day falling in that month when the sun is in the sign of the Wurox, Libera's beast. Morca has gone on the first raid of spring with a party of barons and carls into Chastain. Though Haldane was promised a place in the party, he has been left. Now, in a moment when he has gone hunting beyond the limits set by Morca, he shoots at a pheasant and meets a witch. The witch is JAEL, a Nestorian ancient. She makes a frightening prophecy. She speaks of people in Nestor of whom the Gets have never heard, who will yet live there in a day, soon to come, when the Gets are only a name. She says that the Goddess, Libera, is awake and walks again in the West, her portents everywhere. And, she says, the Gets will meet a bloody end on Stone Heath and Haldane will be the instrument of the Goddess. When he is ready, when he is ripe, the Goddess will come and snatch his soul from his body.

She marks Haldane for the Goddess—she strikes him with her staff and Haldane's tooth chips. While his vision is blurred, he hears Jael say that Morca is now returned to the dun bringing a foreign bride for Haldane. And she disappears magically, with a laugh.

Haldane reaches the dun to find Morca just arrived. With him are LOTHOR, King of Chastain, and Lothor's daughter, PRINCESS MARTHE. Both are cultured beyond Haldane's ability to appreciate. To him, Lothor is a silly, effete little western man with a stick, a circuitiously unpleasant manner, and a lapdog. Marthe is short, plump and unappealing. But Morca has made a marriage between Marthe and Haldane by surprise and force of arm. Morca has agreed to forego the Gettish custom of bride-price in favor of the Western custom of dowry, and brought back a wagon of wealth from

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Chastain. (He had paid no bride-price himself for Freda, daughter of Arngrim, his friend and the right arm of Morca's father.)

Haldane meets OLIVER, Morca's wizard from out of the West. Oliver is a strange man, both laughable and impressive. He does not fight, which makes him nothing among the Gets, and he came to the service of Morca in flight from powerful enemies in the West. On the other hand, he has made a secure place of importance for himself among these Gets, these dangerous men who above all hate and fear magic. He has a powerful tongue which none but Morca may withstand.

Oliver once had charge of Haldane's education, and they were closer then, until Black Morca discovered that Oliver had taught Haldane more than the magical arts of reading, writing and arithmetic. He had taught Haldane a spell. Morca had punished them both in ways each could understand, and separated them. And Morca still kept them largely separate. A well-beaten Haldane, already nervous and uncertain about playing with magic, and suffering sickness from the erratic success of his one spell, only knew that he found it an easy duty to dislike a suddenly sharp-tongued Oliver.

Haldane meets Oliver with his mind still troubled by Jael and her predictions. He has heard from a Nestorian serf that the wurox, the beast of Libera, has been seen again, after many generations, by woodcutters. Haldane must ask Oliver about his experience, but he cannot ask him too much. So he asks, "Does magic cost a witch pain?"

"Magic always takes its price without exception," says Oliver. "It is the one thing I know about magic."

Morca's ambitions are questioned by an old man he keeps as a nay-sayer and a source of the past. OLD SVEIN, a survivor of Stone Heath, accuses Morca of overreaching himself and forgetting the old ways, and blames Oliver as the source of Morca's gross ambitions. But Oliver also is doubtful. He suggests that many barons will not like this marriage. He speaks of kings and witches, and says that too much power is stirring about. He intends to study his book of magic: "It may yet take an Ultimate Spell to keep what you are taking."

The days before the betrothal are eventful for Haldane. For one brief moment, Morca is able to speak to Haldane of his intentions. In that rare moment he convinces Haldane that it is in him that Morca's greatest hopes reside. Morca makes a baron of Haldane—he gives him an earnest young carl, HEMMING PALEFACE. But Haldane takes Hemming's oath of loyalty and makes him truly his own man. And Haldane meets Marthe, his bride-to-be, again. She tries to kill him, though he likes her no better for it. But as Morca says, "If you don't like her, we have rooms enough to keep her in. The story needn't suffer."

Haldane's dreams are as nearly fulfilled as life will allow, though sometimes his tongue worries at his chipped tooth.

Life is at its best at his betrothal banquet. Morca has pink ribands in his beard and Haldane has a great chair of his own, though not as great as Morca's. But then suddenly the little foreign king maligns all of Morca's fathers. Lothor stands and points to Morca's new doors, stolen from Chastain. They burst open and in press Morca's Gettish enemies—Egil Two-Fist, Coughing Romund and others. Barons and carls, and Lothor's knights of Chastain, fresh come from killing the watch and throwing open the gates. And there are traitors, too, among those who have sworn themselves to Morca. There is Ivor Fish-eye, who has been hunting in the woods for the wurox in company with some of Lothor's knights. And there is Aella of Long Barrow, a minor man befitted best for long dull errands.

Black Morca spreads his arms wide and bellows, "For your lives and for Morca! *Alf Morca Gettha!*" And he splits Lothor like a log and strides past Marthe to the cutting

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floor, red sword in hand, to wade in blood.

Svein is killed by Aella of Long Barrow. The fighting is hot. Many others are killed. Haldane and his carl Hemming fight back against back. Haldane knows one baron he fights: Heregar the Headstrong. Hemming is killed and Haldane is struck in the head.

He wakes confused. He lies by a dead man whom he knows. He sees Morca fighting, surrounded and alone. And then, close at hand, he sees Oliver calling down the Chaining of Wild Lightning, an Ultimate Spell. Haldane finds himself mumbling, too, the only uncertain spell he knows—the Pall of Darkness.

Oliver is magnificent. He stands with arms spread, waiting for the white tongues of flame and his own death along with Morca's enemies'. But no flame comes.

Ivor Fish-eye has been waiting his chance, and when Morca is engaged, he slips in behind him and kills him with a knife. Then he holds the bloody knife high in exultation.

Haldane comes to his feet, his lips moving through the last automatic mumble of the Pall of Darkness. He is dizzy and nearly falls from his wound. Then the old wave of cold he has known before rolls over him again. He is invisible to men's eyes, though the gods might see him still.

The carrion wolves set up a gay savage howl. They smear themselves in Morca's blood, painting their faces red with his death. They hack his body apart and they pick through the scattered dowry for prizes.

Then Egil Two-First yells that Haldane must be killed, too.

Haldane the invisible. Haldane the disappeared.

A sudden shattering hand falls on Haldane's shoulder.

PART II: EVASION

8

THE DAY HELD fair promise, should the two fugitives in the forest live long enough to enjoy it. It was as sweet a day as the spring had seen. The morning air was blithe, even in the cool tuckaway of a thicket. The sky beyond the trees was a light blue sea with a few small boats gently riding before the wind. A bird that Haldane neither saw nor heard landed on a branch above his head, tossed him a cheery good morning that he did not answer, and began to whet its bill.

Haldane was in sorry condition. His fine new betrothal clothes were bloodied and dirty, rent and torn. He had bruises everywhere, the worst of which were to knee and back. He wore his first true war wounds, the best of which was a head wound that Oliver had cleaned. It would make a scar to carry. His right eye was blackened, besides. In addition to his wounds and his broken head, he suffered from shock, confusion, fatigue and the sad effects of his small spell of invisibility, itself long passed. He remembered fighting back to back with Hemming Paleface and striving to reach Morca, but he remembered nothing but in flashes thereafter. He found things hard even now to fix in his mind. Worst, for a Get, he cried in weakness and could not help himself.

Before him on the ground were the small remains of his life. They were set out in a half-circle. His long sword. A narrow knife with a black haft. A horn. A boar's tooth graven with Deldring mysteries strung on a rawhide cord. A length of string. And a daffodil that Haldane had added, weeping hotly and laying it beside the sword.

There was dried blood on the sword

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blade, though Haldane had been taught to clean his sword after use lest it rust. He was too confused to remember to do it now that it mattered. There was dirt on the point of the sword, sign of its employment as a staff through the night. That was not right use, either.

In his dizzy moments, Haldane would look at these pieces on the ground and wonder what they did there and why he cried. And then he would remember what Oliver had told him and become lost again in tears.

The bird was not disturbed by Haldane, but when Oliver returned from conning the country from secret, it flew away. The wizard, too, was nothing like his usual grave and well-arranged self. He, like Haldane, was suffering from shock, confusion and fatigue, and the differently upsetting effect of his own failed spell.

He was strange, this plump little fringe-bearded man who looked the fool, and could not help sometimes but act it, but whose tongue and wit had carried him through more different adventures than Black Morca. He was weak, but he dared. Sometimes he dared.

He had done more last night than he had known he could. On their first invisible dash, he had led them to his cell rather than into the night. That was presence of mind. He had snatched up nightcloaks and the dried beef he was wont to chew over while he worked at his book, and placed them in his old bag that he had brought with him from Palsance, keeping a hand on the boy all the while. Then he had broken the greased paper away and chivvied Haldane through the window. The spell had only taken them out of the dun. Then, suddenly, half down the hill, Oliver had been able to see Haldane again. Frightened every step, he had herded and harried the whorl-witted boy across the hills to the forest.

Oliver's magenta satinet bore a record of their desparate passage. It was a thin cold material, made for show and not for hard use. He regretted leaving his daily red robe hanging in his cell, but he had not dared the time to change.

His best daring was not of the moment, but in long plans. He had been planning what to do. He had told Haldane to set his things out, and not been sure he would.

He said, "Good. I see you have managed to empty your pockets."

Haldane said, "Why did I do it? It is all muddle in my mind. I cannot remember. Where is Morca? Did I reach him?"

Oliver licked his fingers. He had been eating a piece of dried beef while he spied variously from the edge of the copse. He was not sorry that Haldane could not remember everything.

He said, "Do you remember the fighting?"

Haldane slowly touched his wounded temple with a hand that held a daffodil with a crushed stem. "I remember fighting. That is the last I remember. Is Morca dead?"

"Yes." Oliver had told him that many times.

"Who killed him?"

Oliver had told him that, too, "Ivor Fish-eye."

"I will kill him. I'll quarter him and hang him in the sun for crows to strip

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clean. I remember. I remember Della and Heregar and Egil Two-fist. I'll kill them all. I'll be like Wisolf the Cunning and live in the houses of my enemies before I kill them."

"You have said that. And you killed Heregar last night. Enough, Haldane, enough," said the wizard in distress. "We must go now. Now."

"Is Morca really dead?" asked Haldane.

"I could only save us two. Morca was dead by then and you were struck senseless. They will be hunting for us in force. It is we who will be quartered and hung in the sun if we don't hie ourselves beyond their reach."

Haldane shook his head determinedly. He muttered the name Ivor Fish-eye over and over under his breath as though he would prevent himself from forgetting. His headshaking made him sick and he closed his eyes and yawed. But he righted himself again and exhanged flower for sword. He was not called Haldane Hardhead for nothing. He stroked the sword with his hand.

"I will stay here and kill them all," he said. Then he began to sing these words, his Carl Song before battle.

Oliver calmed him with some effort. Haldane was too lost to see the conflicts in his own words and he was beyond the reach of argument, but he could be led.

So Oliver would lead him. He returned to his plan. He brought a small box and a book from out of his bag. He took his spectacles out of the box and put them on, ran his fingers through the winter forest of his hair, and began to thumb the loose pages of his gramarie.

The two lost themselves in their own separate worlds. Haldane continued to play with his plans of revenge, remembering each of the stories of the Vengeance of Wisolf in far-off Shagetai that Svein had told him when he was small. He remembered them more clearly than the night just past. Oliver studied the book for some time, not wanting to begin his spell. Then he closed his book and put his spectacles away.

Since it and he had failed each other, Oliver was afraid of his magic. His confidence was shaken. But his plan was to make a spell, one of stronger weave than Haldane's, that would serve to save them. He closed his eyes before he started because his head was light. He tried to draw his courage together. They were a fine pair, both less than their usual selves. And Oliver knew he would be sick from the spell to come. If it worked. But disguise was their best hope of living.

For their purpose, he complected a new spell out of old pieces, as a cook on the demand of occasion might invent something new out of old simplicities like cabbage and onions. It was only when the work was begun and the stew a-simmer that Haldane forgot Wisolf and took notice of what Oliver did.

He came to his feet, saying, "No!" and waving his arms. He made as though to seize Oliver's hand to break the weave, but did not dare finally.

He said, "I want no part of your magics. Stop!"

He remembered neither Oliver's spoiled spell nor his own success.

"What use is your magic now? You

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should have plied it in Morca's behalf when it mattered."

Oliver broke off the spell. "I told you. There was no time for great magic. If not for the spell that I did manage, you would not be alive at this moment. Now be quiet, or instead of the weal of my magic, you shall feel its weight. And be grateful!"

Haldane managed silence, but not gratitude. His face was still too full of various hates, hurts and confusions for it to show gratitude. But silence was sufficient for Oliver.

With Haldane chastened, Oliver resumed his spell, speaking the words of power and signing sigils in the air with his hands. Chancing failure. Chancing sickness for success. Haldane watched, unaware of what was about to happen to him. If he had known what he would become, he would not have ceased protest.

Of a sudden, Oliver and Haldane were different people. Oliver was still short, but no longer stout. He was an old ugly red-haired man, hairy-nostriled and with a cast to one eye so that he seemed to see in two directions. In place of his robe, he wore a brown smock. He was no wizard now, and no Get, either.

Haldane was still a boy, but seemed shorter and younger than himself, and less pretty. He too wore a smock. He too was no Get. He was nobody he would have liked to know. He was disguised as a stupid, slope-shouldered peasant boy, a Nestorian calf.

He held his hands up and looked at them. Short and stubby fingers.

"What have you done?" he cried. "What have you made me?"

Oliver said calmly, "Until the spell runs its course, you wear the guise of a simple Nestorian. I will be Noll to those we meet. You will be my grandson—Giles, we will call you. Let us hope it keeps us alive until we are safe."

"A peasant!" Haldane shouted. "I will not be a peasant! The shame is too great."

He made to tear the smock off, but the illusion was beyond removal. Oliver seized the boy by the shoulder and shook him.

"Listen, you must do as I say! Your Wisolf played an old woman when he had need, and no one thought shame. Use your wits if you are able!"

"It was a Gettish woman that he played, and not some smock-wearing peasant. And when Wisolf departed his enemy's tent, in his basket he carried away a head."

"Use your wits if you are able," said Oliver again. "If you wish your revenge, you must stay alive to take it. There is no safety for us here in this country. We are hunted men. We must flee until Nestor is quiet. When we are safe across the Trenoth in Palsance, and friend and foe show themselves clearly, that will be time enough to be a Get again. Now give me the things you have set aside and I will put them in my bag."

Haldane was confused. Just when he thought he had caught up to himself again, he was suddenly someone new. He did not entirely understand. He turned away from Oliver and sat with his sword and his string and his other treasures. But he did not deliver them to Oliver. He was no peasant named

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Giles. He picked up his horn and fondled it.

"I may be sick from my wounds so that I cannot stand, but my brains are not addled," he said. "What safety is there for me in the West? In Palsance they would kill me as quickly as here. I will stay here until they come along and then I will seek my vengeance."

"No, come with me," said Oliver. "Be Wisolf, Haldane. Use your cunning. Sick and alone as you are, you will be dead if you stay. You can play the peasant in Palsance until the times have sorted themselves. Then you can take your vengenance. But men harry the country for us now. Let us be gone. Or will you leave me to cough and hobble my way to Palsance alone? The man who saved you so that you could have your vengeance?"

Oliver coughed tentatively to show Haldane the sickness he soon would suffer, as Haldane suffered now and did not realize. There was phlegm enough for him to venture a greater cough, a hack that shook him near to falling.

Haldane turned the horn in his hands. "What is there for Oliver in Palsance but the enemies he left behind?" he asked.

What would Oliver find in Palsance? The question did give him pause to think.

A sudden sun of revelation lit Haldane's face. He put the horn to his lips and made as if to blow. Then he looked at the horn again and said, "My grandfather Arngrim is almost as close as Palsance. He will help me gain my vengeance."

Oliver said, still thinking, "Arngrim is farther than Palsance. I could not walk so far."

But Haldane was instantly set. "I will go south along the Pellardy Road to Little Nail and there I will blow my horn outside Arngrim's dun until he opens his gate to me, his own daughter's son. Then I will gather a new army and return to sweep the earth clean of . . ." He could not remember all the names.

"Of Ivor and Romund and Egil."

"And every traitor baron."

Oliver said, "And what welcome would a wizard find with Arngrim?"

"I owe you my life," Haldane said. "I will be your warrant with Arngrim. If you are with me, he will accept you. No Get would turn his own away."

Oliver took out his clay pipe and filled it with yellow weed, his aid to magic and thought, his mediator. He put punk in his firepump and struck a light. It would be the last smoke he would enjoy while spell and sickness held him. His cough had been more than effect. He could feel his chest filling and tightening now. This last pipe helped serve to calm him.

"You could play the peasant until the times have sorted themselves, Oliver," Haldane said. "My grandfather will have a place for a cock-eyed tiller of the soil."

Oliver would have need of Haldane's strength as his own ebbed. He did not like to think of walking to Palsance alone. He thought of the life he would find waiting in Palsance. That was a certainty he had avoided before. He thought of the uncertainty that was Arngrim. At last—as always, at last—he dared.

He finished his pipe and set it down

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on his bag. He said, "It seems that my adventure in Nestor is not yet over. Let us make our way to your grandfather Arngrim."

Haldane came to his knees and gathered his poor possessions. He was much readier to move now. The boar's tooth he placed around his neck where it was lost in the illusion. His knife that was Marthe's, his string that was Rolf's, and even his horn that was Arngrim's, he gave to Oliver who put them away in his sack. Then Haldane made to take up his sword. His wits might be mending, but they were not yet mended.

Oliver told him, "No."

"I cannot leave my sword behind," Haldane said, holding it close. At the moment he was not man enough to wield it. "It is my sword. How can I fight if we are discovered? We need my sword."

Oliver said, "If you carry your sword, we surely will be discovered. Whoever heard of a peasant with a sword?"

Oliver's objection was unanswerable and his will was stronger on this, and he overrode Haldane. But he did not stop with that. He made Haldane bury the sword so that it might not be found and point their direction.

Heldane dug a shallow grave with his sword blade, there where the bushes were thickest, and laid the sword away with its hilt to the east, returning the good iron to the earth from which it had come, tucking the warrior in for his final rest. As Oliver watched, Haldane covered the sword over with dirt and mold and leaves, and then laid the lone daffodil with its crushed stem on the grave.

Haldane said, "Rest, Morca. You will be avenged." And then backed out of the bushes. There were tears again on his cheeks.

It was now well along in the morning. They were being hunted, the son of Black Morca and Morca's wizard. They were not safe. Safety would be Arngrim's fort on high Little Nail, or better Palsance. And Haldane was dizzy-witted.

Oliver grabbed up his bag and led Haldane away. He paused at the last protection of the copse. When he had spied the land he had seen nothing, but he had an unbearable presentiment of danger. He feared the Gets who lurked, waiting for them to step from cover to cut them down. But though he looked again, he still saw nothing, and because he must Oliver led the way from the thicket.

They raised a deer with their first steps. It started up, thrashing to its feet, and bounded away.

In time, Oliver's heart mended.

9

ALONG THE FOREST TRAILS they walked to find the Pellardy Road, first grandson Giles trudging, then old gnarled Noll with his bag. Their pace was slow. There was no spring in Giles' stride, the poor wounded, spell-confused peasant boy Haldane. He still was not sure of himself. And his head ached.

For all that the day was green and gold, Noll was content with the pace. He was stiff. He had spent too much of the night awake and then slept as badly

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as a sailor his first night on land. At his age he needed a good night's rest. The bag he carried with all their lives within was a burden. He would cough frequently but could not clear his lungs.

Haldane was still fuddled. Sometimes he would ask questions like, "I can't remember who killed Hemming. Tell me again?" Other times he would turn and look at Oliver as though he didn't believe in him and expected the stranger behind him to have disappeared. But it was Haldane who led the way, now they had found a trail to follow.

In the blind dash through the morning night to the forest and panting concealment, Oliver had taken them farther than he could recognize the land. It was as strange to him as any place three leas from his native hearth in Palsance. Since he was a boy he had always been best occupied indoors. He knew this country from what other men had let drop of it, and from an old map he had that showed all the duchies of Nestor before the Gets took the land. He knew the map well. It had brought him at the first from Palsance to Morca's Dun in the old duchy of Bary.

So, when they set out, Oliver took the map from his bag and studied it. It told him only that they were in the forest. Haldane was a silent mindspun boy and asked no questions, but Oliver was embarrassed for the map. It showed the road, but not how to reach it. By his map, but more by guess, Oliver led them until they reached a trail.

Then Oliver found he could let Haldane lead the way. Haldane had hunted all over this land since he was small and he did not need his head to be a guide. His feet knew all the trails.

It was a quiet morning with many rests. Oliver called a halt whenever he thought Haldane needed one. Haldane continued distracted. He looked often at his hands and smock and shook his head. He asked questions for his vengeance, too, but Oliver did not encourage the boy with the answers he gave him. Oliver was usually a ready talker, but today he thought much on the Chaining of Wild Lightning and was a silent gnarly red-man.

They reached the Pellardy Road near mid-day. They ate more dried beef as they walked. It was all they had.

There were many rests in the afternoon, too. Oliver called a halt now whenever he thought Oliver needed one. His chest tightened and the bag weighed heavily, a fat stone on his back as great as the stone on his mind. His price for being a red peasant.

In the afternoon, Haldane began to throw off the effects of his spell, the Pall of Darkness, or so it seemed. He was still fey, but more coherent. He continued to peer at Oliver as though to spy him out beneath his strange skin, but he needed to ask less often who killed Hemming or Ludbert or Rolf and remembered the answers better. He remembered Ivor Fish-eye without further reminder. He spoke sometimes with great glee about reaching Arngrim and raising an army. He was often silly.

He began to inquire at his smock with his hands. At last he asked Oliver, "Do I still wear my old clothes? When I forget myself in walking, I can feel my belt. But when I reach for it, it isn't there. And sometimes I feel the wind touch me through the tears in my

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clothes."

Haldane was still following his feet. Oliver for his part followed his map and looked about him for what the map told him he could expect to see. He noticed only as much of the world as showed on his map. Wizards are fools for illusion. That is why they become wizards. Oliver followed maps and believed in them, and he could almost forget that Giles was not a Nestorian peasant boy.

Oliver said, "You still wear your belt and your old clothes. But men's eyes are led to see what they expect to see. When they look at us, they will expect Nestorians and see them. The reality is unchanged and the wind is not fooled."

"Then why can't I touch my belt? I know I can really expect it. Can't I?" Haldane added unwittingly to the illusion he wore by acting the young boy.

To silence Haldane and occupy him, Oliver said, "You can do it, but only if you clear your mind of all thoughts of yourself. When you cease to think of your belt, your hands will be able to touch it."

It was a game that Haldane could not but lose. He played it visibly as they walked along the Pellardy Road through the forest. His hands could not fool his mind. They would try to touch before he could think, and they never could. It made him angry and he gave up in disgust. But natural habit won him what concentration could not and sometime later he found himself for the briefest moment with his thumbs hooked in his belt.

"I felt my belt, Oliver," he said. "I did feel my belt."

"Noll," said Oliver. "You are Giles. And speak Nestorian."

When Oliver remembered to think of it, he worried of what would happen if they were come upon by Gets. But he had strength only to plod the road.

"Noll," said Haldane and did speak Nestorian. "Give me my knife back from your bag. I'll wear it now. My hands will know where to find it when I have need of it."

That was why Oliver continued to carry the bag, even though he plodded.

"We cannot give your hands the chance. We cannot afford to kill. We are safest as simple peasants. Besides, you could not forget yourself long enough to fix the knife in place."

"Safest. Safest," mocked Haldane in Nestorian. "That's all you can think of. What do I do when I need to unbuckle my pants?"

"If you wait until your need is great enough, you will find it no problem. Now, by my map there is a bridge over the next hill. Let us rest there."

"We cannot rest there," said Haldane.

"Why not?"

"There is no bridge on the other side of the hill," Haldane said. And laughed as though he had made a great joke.

"By my map, there is a bridge," said Oliver, "and I believe my map." Even though it of occasion embarrassed him.

When they reached the top of the hill above New Bridge on Rock Run, Haldane said, "As I told you. There is no bridge. It fell down."

"That is bridge enough for me," said Oliver. "My map was right."

"Then you walk across your bridge and keep your feet dry," said Haldane. "I will wade the ford."

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But Oliver wet his feet, too. He waded past the broken pilings standing surprised in riffling water. The two peasants threw themselves down in the sun on the farther bank to dry and rest. Oliver dropped their bag on the ground and panted and coughed. The spell had struck deep. He should not have been abroad wetting his feet.

Wild onion grew profusely around them in little clumps of green. Haldane plucked a spray. He rolled one narrow tube between thumb and forefinger until it broke, and savored the odor. He tasted it and found it good. Then he chose out shoots that pleased him best, discarded the rest, and rolled those he kept in a slice of dried beef.

Oliver was content to watch as he ate, and more content to nod.

The riders were on them almost before they knew. Oliver was struck to the heart. They were Gets. No one else in Nestor rode. The three did not pause at the hilltop as Haldane and Oliver had done.

Haldane leaped to his feet as soon as he saw them. He crammed the last of his meat and onion into his mouth. It was all that his mouth could hold. Oliver feared what he might do, but lacked the force and quickness to prevent the boy.

"Haldane!" he said, forgetting his own injunctions. "Do nothing rash!"

And then had to become more circumspect. There was no place to run or to hide. They must face these Gets. Oliver tried to become Noll in his mind.

Haldane, desperately chewing and trying not to choke on what he chewed, took no notice of the Gets. He stepped down into the water, leaving Oliver on the bank to wonder at him. What did Haldane intend?

Haldane stooped and began to grum among the rocks, fingering the stream bottom. He paid the riders no attention as they splashed by him. He forced the last of the meat and onion down his throat and came up smiling like a simpleton with a dripping bemired shell.

Was the boy being cunning like Wisolf? Oliver could scarce believe it.

The riders reined over them. It was Aella of Long Barrow and two carls. Oliver was glad Haldane lacked his knife. He was sure the boy would have dragged Aella from his horse and dealt with him as Aella had dealt with Svein. But Haldane touched his forehead with respectful muddy fingers. Oliver tremblingly touched his forehead, too.

"What do you do here?" Aella asked. He spoke to them in Nestorian, their language. His tone was peremptory, as though he were an important man. Oliver knew him for an errand runner. Anyone who knew Aella knew him for an errand runner.

"We gather clams to make a meal, your lordship. My grandsire and I," Haldane volunteered. He held out his shell. He was the perfect guileless boy. "It is yours if you like, noble sir. All that we have gathered is yours."

Aella made a disgusted noise, "Faa." He waved it away with a flicking of his right hand. "We seek three on foot. A young girl dressed in white and blue. A Western girl. She is the one we want most. Morca's wizard, Oliver by name, a Western man in red robes. He is a funny little man with a round face and a white beard. And Haldane, the son of

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Black Morca. Have you seen any of these?"

Haldane said, "Do they travel together?"

"We know not. Have you seen them together?"

Oliver spoke hurriedly then in Nestorian so Haldane would have no need to speak again. "No, lord. We have seen no one today. You are the first strangers we have seen."

"How long have you been here?"

"All the afternoon, lord. See, our bag is nigh to full," Oliver said, hefting his bag as though it contained clams.

"At last a straight answer from one of these cattle," Aella said in Gettish to his men. "They have been here the afternoon and they say they have seen no one. We had best return to the dun. It is no use to seek farther along this road. They could not have come so far by noon."

One of the carls spit in the water beside Haldane, and did not take note of the Gettish glower in the Nestorian boy's face. "Unless these lie," he said. "I never saw a Nestorian that would talk straight when it could lie."

"Lie to us? You jest. They would not dare," Aella said, making a rooster of himself. "And they have no love for Morca or his cub. They would not lie for him."

"If they walked all night without stopping, they might have passed in the morning," said the other carl.

"Na," said Aella. "We'll find them when we set the pigs to sniffing them out. The wizard is no countryman. We'll find him under a bush. And the boy is a stubborn ass. Him we will find waving a sword in the shadow of the dun."

"Just as well," said the first carl. "If we are to find one of the three, let it be the girl. There is more reward."

They clapped their heels to their horses and splashed back across the ford. Haldane remained in the water looking after them, burned by their words.

In a rage, he called after them, "When will you raise our bridge again?"

The second carl looked back at them. Haldane bent immediately to the stream and pretended he had said nothing. He paddled in the water until they were gone, and then he straightened again, shaking his hands. He looked at Oliver, uncertain of what the wizard would say of his rashness, but proud of himself, too.

He said, "He called me an ass."

Oliver looked at him for a long moment. All the words that Haldane had spoken to the Gets, including his last call, had been in Gettish. Oliver thought the power of the spell to mislead had been strongly taxed.

He sighed. He said, "You have mud on your forehead."

10

THE WOODCUTTER'S HUT stood in a clearing not far from the road, close enough to be seen by tired and hungry eyes. It was Oliver who spied the thatch near about sunset when their feet were so weary they would scarce carry them from one rest to the next. Haldane saw nothing until Oliver pointed. It was Haldane who carried their sack now and Oliver who led the way.

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"Ah," red-haired Noll said with relief. "We'll seek our shelter there." He coughed too deeply and spat to clear his throat. He had been coughing steadily since they crossed the ford, even after he had given over the bag. "Another night in the open will be the finish of me. Be Giles-now, and let me speak for us. If you must speak, speak Nestorian."

Haldane made no answer. His head ached fiercely and his mind wambled. He was very tired.

He could not read this man's face as he could read Oliver's. He did know this Noll did not have Oliver's sharpness of wit and tongue. He would answer questions only if they were repeated. He ventured nothing. It was as though the spell had struck deeper than appearance. There were moments when Haldane could doubt that it was Oliver at all who walked beside him and wonder why he kept company with this strange peasant man.

It made Haldane mull over the changes that might have been wrought in him that he could not see. He kept testing himself to see if he was really Haldane. He thought he was. But how could he be sure? His hands were not Haldane's. He might be a peasant dreaming he was a Get.

He followed Oliver as he led the way into the clearing, content to trail behind and watch Oliver do things that the Oliver he knew would not do. Stacks of seasoning wood made short walls everywhere. A small boy peeped abruptly from behind one like an archer behind a palisade, then ducked away.

The hut they had seen from the road stood in the center of the clearing. It was clinker-built, the lapping shakes brown under the hanging thatch, weathered to silver where they lacked protection. Over the door of the simple house was its one touch of color, the many-armed wheel of Silvan in red and yellow. A simple god for simple folk. The colors disturbed Haldane. They made him agitated and he did not know why. They matched the colors of Lothor's traveling carriage, but he could not quite remember that.

Silvan's beast, a little white nanny-goat, was tethered to a stake beyond the house under the trees. Scrawny chickens scratched for their lives in the dirt before the door and around the woodpiles, too busy to notice them approaching. A lean shaggy dog lying in a heap did take note. It leaped up, lowered its ears, and advanced growling. It was no little yapper like Lothor's toy. It showed yellow teeth and barked as though it meant them harm.

Haldane stayed safely behind red-haired Noll. He could not cope with growling dogs tonight.

A ragged untrimmed girling appeared in the doorway then and piped of their coming to those within. She was set aside by a man who filled the door. He stepped into the yard followed by a boy who resembled him nearly. The boy was older than Haldane appeared, but younger than Haldane's true age.

The failing sun lit the thatch with evening red. Gentle smoke lifted lazily from the chimney and Haldane thought he could smell dinner simmering over a fire. His head buzzed with hunger and weariness. He ached within and

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without. At the best of times, he was not used to walk like this.

He wanted to stop walking. He wanted food and sleep. He wanted to mend.

He wanted to cry.

The man lifted a hand. His words were courteous, but he was an unyielding wall after his many walls of logs. He said, "Well met. What do you seek, strangers?"

In his other hand he carried an axe and he did not look friendly. Haldane wondered how you could order such a man if you were not a Get. He could lie to one like Aella, but he did not know what to say to a peasant with an axe.

"Well met," Oliver said. "My grandson and I are lost sailors out of Pellardy making our way home overland."

"Lost you are," the man said. "I have never seen a sailor here before."

The dog continued to growl and glower.

"We are not used to walking and we have come far today," Oliver said. He coughed his racking, hacking cough. "My name is Noll. My grandson is Giles. We seek shelter and food."

"What are sailors doing so far from the sea?"

The strange man who pretended to be Oliver pretending to be a sailor said, "Put away your dog and I will tell you the tale."

The woodcutter called the dog away. It ran behind the peasants barking proudly of its courage.

"I'll hear your story."

"Is is worth dinner to you?"

"Would you bargain with me, then?"

"Would you turn away a sick old man?" And Oliver coughed again. "My own tale is rich but it is nothing to the other stories I know. I can tell you of the secret beasts of the sea and how they play. I can tell you of strange lands and their treasures."

The woodcutter scratched his head as though in agrument with himself. Then he said, "Oh, aye, stay for the meal. Come away in to the house. Cob, run inside and say that there are two more to eat with us."

"There's little enough for us it is," said his son. "You know what Mother said."

"Have you not heard that manners are better than meat? There will just be a little less for everyone," the woodcutter said. "I want to hear about the sea and these secret beasts."

Oliver was not content to have won him. He must shake his red head and say, "Ah, where is the old hospitality? Is Pellardy the only duchy that still keeps the true Nestor?"

"Pellardy is the only duchy not ruled by the Gets," the woodcutter said. "They leave us little in Bary to spend in hospitality. These are not the old days of Nestor."

He led the way toward the house. They were trailed by the little boy who had spied them first from behind the woodpile. He stayed a safe distance behind in company with the dog, burying his face in the dog's fur when Haldane looked at him.

Haldane said in a whisper to Oliver, "Is a story all?" A story seemed too small a reason for the peasant to share his food. Noll didn't answer but only gave his head so small a shake that Haldane could not be sure if he had

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shaken his head at all.

Oliver spoke loudly then. "It is my brother who did this to us. We own a boat in common but since he is older he thinks it is his. We quarreled in Eduna. He sent us ashore on an errand and while we were gone, he sailed off to Grelland. He left us with only a single small coin, and that is long spent." He coughed again until he caught himself against the doorway and leaned there rattling for breath.

"That is a hard tale," the woodcutter said. "It is a long walk from Vilicea. You must be weary."

"We did not make it in a day," said Sailor Noll. "A longer walk to Pellardy before us, too. But every step I think of my brother's face when he sees us waiting on the quay."

He told what he would do his brother when he found him and winked his shy eye. The peasant nodded and laughed with him, happy that sailor and woodcutter could think so much alike.

"Aye, hear that," the peasant said, turning of a sudden to the small boy with the dog. "Did you hear? Mark what it is to be quarreling with your brother. Take a lesson from that." To Oliver he said, "It is all I can do to keep them from fighting long enough to eat and sleep."

"My brother and me exactly," said Oliver. "Listen to what your father tells you."

Haldane did not know from what source of strength this changed Oliver drew his strange lies. Haldane wanted nothing more than to set his bag down and put his face against it.

The hut was dimmer than the evening shadows of the forest and warmer than the evening cool. It seemed like a sanctuary to Haldane, a place to stop at last. Cob stood beside a shapeless peasant woman stirring her kettle over the fire. There were besides a gammer snoozing in the corner with a cat on her lap, and a girl suckling a baby at her breast. She seemed no older than Marthe, the Princess of Chastain who was sought by the treacher Gets. Children that Haldane was too tired to count were in and out the doorway.

The woman turned from the kettle, spoon in hand. "And who is this you've brought to eat my children's food?"

"This is Noll, a sailor, and his grandson Giles," said the woodcutter. "Noll is going to tell us stories of the sea."

"I care nothing for that," she said and swung her spoon at them. "There are too many of you in here. You are in my way. Take your stories of the sea back outside."

The woodcutter did not try to argue. "Call on us when dinner is ready."

The woodcutter picked up a stool from beside the table and grasped Oliver's arm, turning him about. "Hey, come all ye who wish to hear tales."

Tales from a sailing stranger were a treat, and everybody but the dozing grandmother and the cat in her lap leaped to follow the two men outside. A small boy, near a twin for the one with the dog but a touch smaller, gave Haldane a wary look and then scuttled past him out the door. Haldane didn't follow. He had no wish to hear Oliver's grandfather stories. He just wanted to stay here in this warm dimness and smell the rich simmer. He cuddled the bag, put his back against the near wall

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and slowly sagged to the floor.

Young Cob took the girl with the baby by the hand. Was he a man with a wife of his own? The woman at the kettle reached out with her spoon and rapped him on the shoulder before he could get out the door.

"Bring me my wood in before you settle down, Cob."

"You have wood," Cob said. "You don't need any more. The woodbox is full."

"That's rainy day wood. Bring me in wood now, and no argument." The ragged girling who had first called their arrival almost slipped out the door, but the peasant woman stopped her with a look and a wave of her spoon. "And where are you off to, Magga?"

"I want to hear the stories, too," the girl wailed, anticipating that she couldn't.

"I need you to stir the pot."

"You always say that."

"It's stir the pot or milk Nanny."

"Why is it always me?"

Haldane paid the squabble no mind, even when the girl burst into hot burning tears. He put his cheek against the cool canvas of the bag, yawning, yawning. He was so tired and his head ached like a beaten drum. He felt both wonderful and wretched as he tried to snatch sleep.

He felt the warmth of pleasure at the memory of his cleverness in fooling Aella of Long Barrow at the ford. He had taken the simple stupidity of the peasants he had met mucking in the water that day at New Bridge and made of it a polished shield to catch the sun and blind the eyes of traitor Gets. And who else but he would ever have thought of that? But he felt the warmth of embarrassment at the thought of mud on his hands, even to fool one like Aella.

All his mind was like that, as lost in strange seas as the brother of Sailor Noll. His sword had tasted blood and he had taken wounds. But his sword was buried and his wounds were lost in this disguise. He had fought bravely and given no ground. He had slain Heregar the Headstrong, who was a man of reputation. But what was that when Morca was dead?

If he believed Oliver. If he believed the man who pretended to be Oliver.

He did not remember killing Heregar. If he had killed Heregar, he would remember it, wouldn't he? He didn't. He had only Oliver's word for it. He had only Oliver's word for many things.

Yes. How could Morca be dead? How do you set down a mountain? You cannot do that. But that was part of what Oliver had said. Only one of many implausibilities. If Oliver were to be believed.

But Oliver, whom he knew, had changed before his eyes into a stranger. It came into Haldane's head to doubt Oliver.

It was the only thing he could do.

The world was not right. The world was past caring whether it was right or not, and it was up to Haldane to see it put back right again.

To do that, he must think as carefully as he could, in spite of the distractions thrown into his mind to keep him from grasping two consecutive thoughts. They would not let his brain sit still. It must keep moving. But he would fox

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them, Oliver and those in league with him.

He was stubborn. He was known for being stubborn. In spite of these distractions, he would remember.

They had him locked out of the dun in this nightmare, this unending rush of awfulness, confusion and implausibility. That was first.

What was second?

Oh, yes. Second. This strange darkness of warmth and unfamiliar odors was a distraction. As long as it continued, he could not find his way home again to his bed where he belonged. But it was not real, this place. He knew that now.

Some while after, he thought about third.

Third? What had third been? In the search for third, he almost lost his grasp on the thoughts that came first and second, but by an effort of will—for Haldane was stubborn above anything—he held on to them, and brought third safe into his breast.

Third, knowing that he was caught in a snare, he knew the secret. If he could shut this place out of his mind, if he could concentrate long enough and hard enough, the nightmare would be over. It would be over now. He would wake to find himself home again in the bed he had been born in.

That was all.

Haldane skwunched his eyes, and knew the sensation as one more snare to trap him in this unreal world of never-ending shape change. He concentrated. He concentrated. He blotted out the warmth and odors. He blotted out everything. But . . . but . . . but.

He could not blot out the insistent sound of crying. No matter what he did, he could not make it go away. It had him trapped here in the nightmare. He could not shake it from his eyes—his ears saw too much.

Resigned—for it meant that he was not ready yet, less than fully ripe for rebirth, and not that he had forgotten his hard-won truth—he opened his eyes.

He saw the most likely implausibility they could conjure to match the sound he had heard. The woman was gone out into the evening somewhere. The litle girl—they had called her Magga, hadn't they—was stirring the hanging pot. She was barely tall enough. She stirred and stirred. And she bawled in open-hearted loss. Almost he could believe that what he saw was real. Almost—it was that much familiar and that much strange.

The grandmother in the corner came suddenly erect in her small chair, as though she had been given leave to begin now that his eyes were open. The movement disturbed the sleeping cat in her lap and it stood tall on tiptoes and stretched itself in an abrupt and unlikely manner, front legs, back legs, before settling down again in a new and more comfortable position, as though it had not moved at all.

But he remembered.

"What's the matter, child?" the old woman asked. "Did the world end while I was asleep and I nodding through it all?"

The little girl turned her way, never ceasing her sobs nor her stirring.

"There's a foreign man telling stories in the yard and everybody gets to hear

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but me. Mother says I have to stir the pot, and it isn't fair. I always miss out. I'm always left to stir the pot while everyone else goes off."

"Ah, it isn't fair," the old lady said. "They don't know what they are missing. I can tell better stories than any foreign man. I know the best and truest stories in the world. And they . . . oh, what do they know? Mind the kettle, Magga, and I will tell you a story."

She was a very plausible implausibility. She was like the Nestorian nurses he had had when he was small. When he was tiny. Like one—the salty one who said strange things. Not the other, the stupid one they had sent away. The one they kept, they who controlled the dream.

What was he trying to remember?

Rebirth.

The girl said, "But you don't know stories about the strange beasts of the sea."

Haldane had an image in his mind of a sea beast, black and warmly sleek, being born, *pl-l-l-op,* into the sea.

"Hush, now," the old woman said. "Are you as old as I to know what I know? Are you as wise as the strange black eyewhisker of Tiddly Thomas, my old cat? I know every story there ever was, I know it better, and what is more, I knew its mother before it was born. You don't need to listen to a cock-eyed sailing man when you can listen to me. Now which is it—his story from my mouth, told better than he could ever tell it, or a new story that no one else has heard from the day the world was hatched until now?"

The little girl gave off crying, but not stirring, though the stirring was an effort. She said, "As good as the story of the bad brother and the good brother and the wonderful bird?"

"Ah, that. Better. A story with a meaning like the nut hid in a walnut fruit. Stir. Stir. And we'll find the nut together and crack it."

The little girl stirred on. "Cob says a story is only a story," the little girl said. "Cob says that stories don't mean anything."

"Are you trying to stir me, girl, or the pot?" said her old grandmother. "Every story has some meaning, even one about strange beasts of the sea. Stories mean more than their tellers know. There was a time I knew no better than you or Cob, but I've learned enough now not to stub my toe on a dark night. Any fool can tell you a story, but it is a rare fool who knows what his story means. I'll tell you the story of the Prince Jehannes and the Goddess. If you'll stir. If you'll stir. The stirring makes the making."

"I'm not ready," the poor little girl said. But she never ceased to stir. "I'm not ready! I'm afraid. I've never stirred so long. I've never stirred so long. I can't stir much longer."

"You can do it," the grandmother said. "You can stir until the story is made."

The little girl screamed then, but she continued to stir. Round and round the pot she swept the spoon.

Haldane pulled himself out. He had almost let himself believe that the world was as he was finding it. But he did know better. The old lady had been asleep. How could she know of the cock-eyed sailor? Wood! Cob had been told to bring wood and he had not

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come. The peasant woman had gone out to milk the goat, but she had not come back. If this were real, she would have come back with milk to believe.

It was the mention of the Goddess that had told him—reminded him. That was where things had gone awry. He was asleep in his bed the night before Morca's return if only he could find his way back there again. That was where the world had changed. That was where the nightmare had started, there in the woods with the witch Jael.

Oh, they thought they could fool him. They thought they could make him forget, but he was stubborn and he would remember no matter what they did. He would. They should not have talked of the Goddess in front of him. He had caught them unawares again.

He tried to shut the distraction away as he had tried before, now that he knew more than he had before. But again he failed. Always when he had shut it all away, there was one last likely sound that drew him back into the nightmare. One something. One last likely . . .

There was a sudden intrusion on his foot, as though someone had stepped on it very loudly and followed it with a splash of sudden warm wetness along his leg.

Was he born again? He opened his eyes to see and they had him again.

The peasant woman said, "Oh, I didn't see you there." She set her pail of milk down. "Magga, leave off that stirring and light a tallow drip."

Magga said, "You left me there to stir so *lo-ong*. You were coming right back."

"Ha!" said the peasant woman. "I got to listening to the sailor man's story and I forgot myself."

Behind the woman, crowding into the house out of the night as though to impress Haldane with the troop, were Sailor Noll and all the other phantasms of Haldane's dream. The woodcutter. Cob and his wife and baby. Four children, one after the other, the two little boys at the tail shoving at each other.

Haldane stole a quick look at the old gammer in the corner. She was fast asleep, her mouth hanging wide, as though she had never been awake. But where was the cat? He had misplaced the cat.

He looked around wildly for it, and there it was at his elbow. It was larger than he had thought and orange. And over its left eye was a black whisker, a single whisker standing amidst the lighter whiskers.

The cat pressed its head against Haldane's shoulder and shoved. Then it looked up at him with all-knowing eyes and said, *"Mrr-ee-ow?"*

11

HALDANE WAS PLACED at the end of the table by Oliver's left elbow when they sat down to eat. He did not resist. The little girl Magga was seated opposite him. He stared straight ahead at her without seeing her clearly while the peasant woman filled bowls from her well-stirred kettle all round the table.

Then the woodcutter blessed the food in the name of Silvan. Noll added words in the name of Porton, the sailor's god.

Magga said, "And Libera." And was overheard.

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"What was that?" her father asked. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'And Libera, too,'" she answered in a small voice.

The woodcutter looked from his small daughter to her grandmother asleep unaware in her small chair in the corner. "Has that old woman been filling your head with the Goddess again? It is bad enough to see a wurox running in the woods without having the name of dangerous gods used in my house. I want none of it. We live by Silvan here." He turned to his wife and said, "I thought I told you there was to be no more of that?"

"What have I to do with it?" said the peasant woman. "Don't tell me. Tell my mother if you dare."

"How can I? She is always asleep when I try and she will not hear me. You women are in this together. All of you."

"Not I," said his son's wife, seated at his right. "I know nothing of Libera."

"That's true," said the woodcutter, ruffling her hair. "You are a good girl."

He seemed ready to round on his daughter again when Sailor Noll said, "What matter? Thrice-blessed food tastes best."

"What was that?"

"It is a saying we have in Pellardy." Noll coughed, shaking his head with the effort, then dipped his spoon deep. "And this tastes good. The best we have had since we left home port."

The moment was saved and all turned to dipping their spoons and sopping their bread before the food grew cold. The woodcutter and his son took turn about in plying Sailor Noll with questions. Between coughing and spoons of food, he answered them all with patient invention.

Haldane did not even listen to what they asked, even when a question was addressed to him. They were noughts, these peasants that had been placed here in the woods for him to meet and be further confused by. They were empty phantasms. If he could not shut them out of his mind to end the dream when he wanted it to end, he would ignore them.

He dipped his own spoon in his own small bowl. He did not know what the dreamfood was. There were vegetables and little light bits of twisted meat in a gravy broth. Though he did not know what it was, he ate it. That was his compromise with the dream.

Noll apologized for Haldane's silence. "Do not expect much of poor Giles. I do his thinking for him. He is a poor simple dumbstruck boy. Do you mark his stony stare? My grandson was fetched a great clout by a swinging boom when he was small and it knocked all the sense out of him."

Haldane continued to eat as Noll spoke, making no sign that he understood the words. This was not cleverness. It was continued disbelief. He was caught in this evil dream and the dream continued. He wanted desperately to find his way safe home again, and did not know how to do it. Well, he could wait. He would wait if he must.

Cob stared at him across the table. "I see it," he said. "His eye is fixed. It's very like that staring agate the man once showed us at market."

"Very like," his father agreed.

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"But what is a boom?" Cob asked.

Haldane listened to Noll's voice as he answered, letting his words slip away. He cared nothing for the words. He wished to know if Noll was a nothing like these peasants, one more shade used by the unknown dream master to fool and fuddle him, or was he a more active tool, able to choose for himself what he said and did? Haldane could not tell.

And the dream gave him no quarter. While Noll spoke, there came a knock on the door, a signal. There was a triple rap followed by a double tap. Noll fell silent. The knock was repeated.

In the silence Cob said, "It's Uncle Jed. It must be." He leaped up to take down the bar that was fixed across the door of the hut to keep strangers out. Outside the dog was barking.

"But what would Jed be doing here?" asked the woodcutter. He pointed at the woman. "If he's in trouble, it's you and your mother who must see to the mending of it. I'll have no more of it."

"Is that the thanks he gets for the food he brings you?" the woman asked.

Out of the night came a great large peasant man, red as an apple and excited as a jaybird. His breathing was labored. Cob kicked the dog in the nose with one foot and barred the door again behind his uncle.

"Sit here. Sit here," said the woodcutter, waving to his son's seat. "What is the excitement? Why are you so far from home this night?"

The peasant man motioned him silent. He cleared a space in the air with his hands. He took a deep breath and swallowed hard.

There was something familiar about him, but Haldane could not say what it was. He must have seen him about the village when he was awake. The dream was economical to bring him to these distant woods.

"It is great news! The world is turned upside down. Black Morca is dead! They say the Gets are at war amongst themselves. They have killed Morca and stuck his head on a pole over the gate of his own dun."

"Why would the Gets kill their own king? How would you know of it?" asked the woodcutter. "When did you ever see Morca's dun?"

"Never. But why wouldn't I know? They say the pole is there to be seen by anyone who passes. The news is all through the village. And the Gets are out in troops around the country seeking Morca's son to do the same again for him."

" 'They say.' 'They say,' " the woodcutter repeated, shaking his head. "How could Black Morca be dead? Who is there that could kill him? You've been drinking bad brew again."

"You won't believe him because Morca was your favorite," said the peasant woman. "You liked him too well."

The woodcutter shook his head.

"It's true," the peasant man said. "He's dead. I know it's true. Four Gets stopped me as I was coming here and asked me if I had seen the boy Haldane." He had his breath back now and he played the teller. "I thought on it long and then I told them that I had." The peasant assumed a vacant slack-jawed look for a moment. He nodded his head earnestly, and then he laughed. "They were happy until I told them

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that it was a week past."

Haldane knew him then. This was the great lout who had been fishing in the mud at New Bridge, the one who had asked after the fallen bridge just as Haldane had asked Aella this very day. And in the same manner. Haldane's heart tumbled as he realized that he had been made a fool of.

The peasant woman shook her head. "You'll buy yourself more trouble than you have any use for if you go on playing games with Gets, Jed. You always were a silly boy. They will kill you someday."

But she picked up an empty wooden bowl from the sideboard and began to fill it for him from the kettle hanging over the coals of the banked fire.

Poor Haldane. He hated these peasants for what they said and he hated the dream for stupidly continuing when it had already squeezed him dry. Enough! Enough! He had learned all the nightmare could teach him, hadn't he? And yet it went on. Why couldn't it stop? He had not been able to force it out of his head. He had not been able to ignore it by sitting numbly. He felt called upon to act, urged to act, compelled to act.

Noll said, "Yea, I think what he says must be true. We were stopped by three Gets on the road today and they asked after this Haldane and others. And they showed their teeth when they did."

"Gets are always showing their teeth," said the peasant woman.

"Who is this stranger?" asked Jed.

"It is a sailing man with great stories to tell and his idiot grandson. They are staying with us this night," said the woodcutter. "If Morca is truly dead, what are we to do?"

"Keep the door barred until there is a new king," said his wife.

"Not I," said Jed. "This is the time to act while the Gets are all at odds. I'm off to carry the word to Duke Girard. We will throw the Gets out of Bary now and make life as it used to be."

"Me, too," said Cob. "I will go with you. I want to be an outlaw, too."

Haldane's head was wild. He stood slowly. No one paid him heed but Noll, who put a restraining hand on his arm. Haldane shook it off. He looked from one peasant to another. He was suddenly aware of something looming over his head and he ducked away before he saw that it was only cheeses hanging from the rafters.

"You shan't go," said Cob's young wife.

"Wake your mother, Jed, and ask her," said the woodcutter. "She is old and strange, but she has seen much and I trust her advice."

Jed crossed the room and went to his knee in front of his mother's chair. Before he could shake her, she came erect, spilling the cat from her lap, and fended him off.

"I'm awake," she said. "I'm awake. Hear my word, Jed." She spoke prophetically. "If you join Duke Girard, you will starve and die in the forest, fight and die in the forest, die in the forest. The time will come when the Goddess sends help to Nestor and all the West and a new and peaceful Golden Age will dawn. But this is not yet that day. That will be another spring. For now, go on home and keep the door barred until the Gets have chosen their new king."

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"See," said Cob's young wife.

Jed rose, shaking his head. He pointed his finger at his mother. "*That* is why I sent you away. *That* is why I sent you away. You are always saying me no. Well, I won't listen to you. I will join Duke Girard whatever you say."

"Shh," said his sister, the peasant woman. She held out the well-filled bowl. "Here, now. You must be hungry. Have some of the good clams that you brought to us."

Clams?

Clams? Was that what the dream-food was?

It was all too much for Haldane. His stomach turned a somerset inside him.

He looked wildly round the room. He must do something. He must break his way out.

As Jed turned toward his sister, Haldane lunged between him and the steaming bowl of food. With a sweep of his hand, he knocked the bowl away, the food spilling, bowl flying. Then he swung around and with his fist he struck Jed square in the nose.

There!

There indeed! But the nightmare continued. The peasants unbarred the door and hustled Sailor Noll and his idiot grandson out into the darkness. And they threw their bag after them. The door slammed.

12

OLIVER WAS SICK from his spell that night and could not sleep. As proof that wizards are as silly as any mortal man and twice as silly as some, he blamed Haldane for that, as though Haldane would not have preferred that he had left his spell uncast. The hard forest ground was an insult to Oliver's aching body, striking him small coward blows every time he coughed. His face burned. His soft palate was raw and clotted. His chest was filled with sick syrup that no cough could clear. He lay, wrapped in his night cloak and his resentment, listening to Haldane's even breathing.

At last he picked himself up and set his back against a tree. He arranged his cloak around him as a cover against the clear probing coolness of the night so that he was as comfortable as he could manage. Sitting, his chest bothered him less, and the tree bole was more of a friend to his back than the ground had been.

In the normal way of things, he thought much and he made many plans, but he did not think or plan now. He let his mind drift with the night. He heard the forest move around them. He let his fevered face be washed by the breeze as though it were a damp cloth in the gentle hands of good mother night. He turned his face up to welcome it, dreaming that he was a boy again at home in Palsance with all his life's adventure yet before him.

He watched as a bright star slowly rose above the tree shudder and sway. He was no country man, nor a sea man neither in spite of his stories, to be keeping track of the course of wandering stars. He was only a wizard whose spells of occasion failed—though never when it was truly of moment that they succeed—and he spent his nights in bed in the comfort of his cell, not gazing at the skies.

But though he had not followed the

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progress of this planet in many long years, he knew it at first sight for the seat of Gradis. He knew many more things than he could remember learning, and his eyes, which needed aid when he pored over his book, were otherwise keener than other men's when he chose to employ them. Other men might not always see the pale white corby Con, Gradis's faint companion who brought messages winging from Jan and Libera and the other gods. When Oliver was a boy, he spied it often when others might not be sure they did, and he could see it now even with his old eyes.

If Oliver had a god, which he did not, it might have been Gradis as well as any. Many noblemen in Palsance held by Gradis. But when Oliver was a grown man, the craft master Vidal of Grelland had made for him his reading spectacles, and while he waited for them to be done, Vidal had offered him a look at Gradis and Con through a long glass that brought them nearer the eye. There were those, Vidal said, who were afraid to look. Not Oliver. He had lost faith in all gods when he was young. The gods had left him to his own devices and he had prospered best when he did the same for them. So he looked. And he saw that Con was no corby, no winged messenger. Con was a moon, like Jana, and only one moon among three. Vidal said there were four, but that one was hid behind Gradis. Oliver was neither afraid nor surprised by this new knowledge. He was rather delighted to know one more thing that other men did not.

Oliver was a man of hard sense. He believed only in things certain and exact—like his book of spells and himself. Like new knowledge.

He never failed when success mattered. That was why his failure in the Chaining of Wild Lightning, his great failure, had shaken him to his marrow. He thought he believed in nothing uncertain. To learn of belief's uncertainty only in that moment when belief fails is overtoppling. He had lost his faith for the second time, and this time the jolt was greater, for his unknowing faith had been in himself.

And here he was, lost in the forest, cast out into the night with a boy as bewildered as himself. And needing the boy to live. These were hard days.

The gentle curve of root and trunk made him a cradle to lie in. He lay back and watched the progress of Gradis as it climbed in the night sky. He coughed sometimes. In time, he dozed a little.

He was wakened suddenly by Haldane. The boy sat bolt upright and screamed wordlessly so loud that his voice cracked and went soundless. Haldane leapt to his feet and struck out at invisible enemies with wild scything arms. He was crazed with fear.

Haldane cried out: *"Ayeee!* Libera let me alone! I will not go with you!"

What was most strange to Oliver was that Haldane's cry was not in Gettish, but in country Nestorian. Oliver could not explain that. He did not know that it was Haldane's breast language.

Oliver was frightened, too. He cast his cloak aside and struggled to his feet. He was desperate.

"Be quiet," he said. "They will hear us." And he made to interfere with Haldane's striking arms.

He was muddled himself. His first

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waking fear was of a forest filled with enemies listening to hear them and ready to sweep down with naked swords. He wanted most for Haldane to cease to bellow his cries.

Haldane was not properly awake. He was in a blind fighting trance and he kept Oliver at a distance with the wildness of his undirected blows.

"Nay! Nay! Stay away from me!"

Then Haldane tangled his feet in his night cloak and fell heavily. Oliver was on him instantly, pinning him to the ground.

"Quiet, boy! Quiet, Haldane! For our lives, quiet!"

But Haldane writhed and struggled under Oliver's hands. He made lost and frightened sounds like a strange whining tune.

It was all the wizard could do to keep his seat and contain the boy, and he felt his sickness overwhelming him. He used his greater weight to hold Haldane down and used his hands to wind the boy's cloak around him and inhibit his wildness. One desperation was pitted against another.

Haldane cried, "The wurox! I am being taken! Gets assist me!" He cried now in Gettish.

"There is no wurox here!" Oliver cried in return. "There is no wurox here!"

To silence Haldane's cries, he took the last corner of the cloak and stuffed the wad into Haldane's mouth until the boy gagged.

Oliver fell away, struggling to cough, coughing in order to breathe, unable to breathe for his coughing. He was old. His head rang in circles. He coughed, spat and choked. He coughed until his lungs were raw and he was near to vomiting and he took no note of Haldane who was coughing and choking himself as he fought against the cloak.

When Oliver looked up, he could make out Haldane panting as he was panting, struggling to rise as he was struggling to rise.

Haldane said, "Where. . . What is this place? Who are you?" He was speaking Gettish still, and what was better, he seemed aware of his words.

"It is me, Oliver," the wizard said, fighting a battle for every word. "This is the forest. You had a nightmare."

"Oh, no! Nay: You are not Oliver. That is not Oliver's voice."

"I am Oliver. Come to yourself! I cast a spell to guise our appearance until we win through to Little Nail. Remember! Remember!"

"But that was the dream!" Haldane said, and his voice was wilder again. He pointed a finger at Oliver in the cool night dimness and pushed away like a broken crab on one hand. "You brought me back into the dream! I was home safe in my bed and you dragged me back to this again."

"Nay, nay. Stop," said Oliver. "I am Oliver and you are Haldane. If you were home safe in your bed, that was the dream. If this forest be a dream, it is the dream that can be ended only by death. It is the dream in which you will gain your vengeance."

Haldane halted his progress, fetched against a sapling that would not break. "Where. . . Where is Morca?"

"Morca is dead. Don't you remember? The peasant Jed said that his head now sits on a pole before the

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dun."

Haldane stroked his cheeks with his fingers as though to test them. He said slowly, wonderingly, "But Morca was alive. I was asleep in my bed. I was sleeping there and I dreamed. I dreamed—oh, many strange and awful things. I dreamed of a battle. Morca brought a Western princess and I was to marry her only there was a battle instead. Then. . .then I don't remember, but there were peasants. They were not real. I knew they were a dream. I struck one because he was a dream and I wanted him to know it, too. But the dream did not end. They cast us into the forest. And then the wurox came to me and spoke."

"Nay," said Oliver. He waved his hand to silence Haldane. He hawked to clear his chest. "All that you thought was a dream was true. All but this wurox that you dreamed."

Haldane must not have seen the waving hand in the darkness for he answered in an angry voice as though he cared not to be disbelieved: "There was a wurox! It came and it tried to carry me away with it. I would not go. I struggled. I fought free and ran. I ran and ran and I hid, but it found me. I ran again. I hid in the small deep darkness and it found me. It was about to take me then but I struck it down. But it rose up again and took me and I cried for help. And then I woke. But I was not in my bed. I was here in the dream again!"

And he cried in fear and desperation. He rocked back and forth as he cried.

Oliver sighed deep. How like a Get this all was, to dream of gods and to strike them with his hands. Things like this did not happen to him. Simple reality was enough of a trial.

He said, "You have seen your own bed for the last time until you and your grandfather Arngrim raise an army and retake Morca's Hill. And move Morca's head off the pole where it sits. This is no dream. You were asleep here all the time you thought yourself in your bed. And you will be here when you wake in the morning."

"But the wurox. . ."

Oliver picked up Haldane's night cloak and threw it at him. "Listen to me!" he said in exasperation. "This is no dream and there is no wurox here. There never was. You have been wounded and you are confused. You slept little last night, Haldane, and you walked far today. If we are to reach your grandfather, you have far to walk tomorrow. So please, go to sleep again, and let me do the same!"

"But how can I trust you?" Haldane asked. "Oh, my senses are deceived! What can I believe?"

Oliver said in a wearied voice, "Believe this. You must trust me. You have no one else to trust. If we are to live, we must trust each other. Go to sleep now. When you wake in the morning, you will wake here. I will keep you from all wuroxes."

Fine brave words. Falsely spoken. For all his years among the Gets, Oliver still saw them with the cool eye of a stranger. He did not truly trust Haldane and would not. Even unfuddled, the boy was a raw and reckless Get who required careful watch. Oliver bore Haldane because he needed him.

Oliver turned away. Pretending to ignore the boy, he found his own cloak by

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the base of the tree where he had left it. He wrapped it close about him once more, cleared his chest of phlegm, and with great show lay down, his back to Haldane, and left him behind.

That was the last he remembered until morning came to them in the woods. It was a cool and misty morning, and Oliver woke damp, aching and grouchy. Still he had slept. Haldane was frisky as a colt. He made no reference to his behavior with the peasants or to his nightmare. He was quick to fold away the night cloaks and to bring out the very last of Oliver's dried beef. Oliver suffered him in surly silence except for occasional reproachful coughs.

As he ate, he thought. If his map and his calculation were correct and he could force himself to continue, they were no more than two days from Little Nail and Arngrim and a safe place in this chaos of Nestor. He thought he could go so far with Haldane's help and Haldane's vouch to open the gate for him. Oliver's strength was not great, but his endurance was to be reckoned with.

When they finished the last crumbs of beef, Haldane made to shoulder Oliver's bag again, but Oliver pulled the bag away.

"No!" he said.

He swung it up onto his own back and they left their broken bedding place in the small greens of the forest floor. They set off again to find the road, the Pellardy Road for these two Pellardy sailors, the road that ran under the eye of Little Nail where they would leave it.

But as they departed the glade, Oliver saw something strange. Coughing, weaving a bit as he found his stride under the weight of the bag, he found himself looking at the track of an animal in the soft floor of the forest. It arced around their bedding place as though the animal had circled round them while it thought its own thoughts. But most unsettling was that the tracks were the great split hoof marks of kine. And great, indeed! If the track were a true index of the animal, this boss was twice the size of any mortal cow that Oliver had ever seen.

As long as he had been in Morca's dun, as long as he had been a wizard, Oliver had made it his business to hear and weigh all mention of strange happenings. He was as well aware of the talk of wuroxen in the woods current these past weeks as he was of Haldane's dream this past night. And he knew whose beast the wurox was.

Oliver may have lost his faith in the gods, but he had not cast off belief. The tracks there in the forest round about their camp bothered him more than he could like. He was ready to argue that they meant nothing, but he was readier to pretend that he had never seen them and readiest of all to leave them behind and forget them entire. He wanted no part of Libera.

He said sharply, "Stop dragging. Either you set a pace, boy, or I will."

He made no light talk of dreams or the tracks of wuroxen. If Haldane saw the circle there in the forest, he said nothing either, and Oliver was content to have it that way.

13

LIKE A GOSLING trailed by a goose in

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reverse of all the common order of the world, Haldane led the pack-burdened old man along the turns of the Pellardy Road. He pretended to be blithe, but his lightness was a lie. He felt eyes on his back.

Haldane knew Noll for a liar and his enemy, this cock-eyed shade who claimed to be Oliver and was not. He aimed to fool him and be free. Around his neck, and lost in the illusion of a Nestorian sproutling that he still smothered under, was his good string. Hanging from the string was his horn and his knife. When Haldane had brought out their crumbs of breakfast from Noll's deep blue bag, he had slipped out all his possessions and secreted them on his person. Now that he had his own things about him once more, he was unbound, free to run in the first moment when Noll's back was turned. He was free to be free.

But he was also afraid. He had meant to carry the pack and Noll had seized it from him. Did he know what Haldane had taken? Would he notice?

As Haldane walked, he paused long enough to pluck a heavy blade of bog grass from a seep by the wayside. To still his heart, he stretched it tight between the tips and the balls of his thumbs. Then with deliberation he blew into the gap where his thumbs met, just as he was used to do when he was small. The reed fluttered, shrieked and honked like an abused woman until the hills were filled to overflowing with the secrets of his heart. Haldane laughed.

"Why are you doing that?" Noll cried from behind, looking up in pretended distress from under the weight of his sack. Oh, the liar!

Haldane mistrusted him in everything. It was Sailor Noll who had kept him so spun about with new fancies that he was too dizzy to be sure of any truth. It was Noll who had lied to him about the wurox. Haldane had seen the tracks this morning round about their camp. But he knew Noll now.

"Hey, now, it's a beautiful day and my spirit is singing," said Haldane. He blew another frightful blast to prove his words, and smiled cunningly.

It was a beautiful day only for those who love dampness. The high-shouldered hills were covered with muted spring shades of green, red, purple, white and yellow, a textured surface of dull running color. It set Haldane in mind of a tapestry that Morca had carried home through the Great Slough of Vilicea and hung in his hall in spite of its ruination because he liked the strange unsettling thing it had become. And because others did not. The skies that capped the narrow valley where the road sought its lean way south were as cool and wild and grey as old ice.

"That noise will only succeed in bringing enemies upon us. Or rain," said Noll. "We can do without both."

What need of new enemies? The one at hand was enough for Haldane. He blew another screeching trumpet call on his grass horn.

"Enough!"

Haldane grinned and threw the rush away. "Mayhap it will be our enemies who are rained upon," he said. "Let us wish them wetness and shelter for ourselves."

His mind was working clearly now, or so he was given to think. In truth, he

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was only in part recovered, like a mud-died stream half-settled.

His strength was greater today than yesterday. His head ached less. If there were confused places in his memory even yet, he could remember clearly enough what had happened to him yesterday and last night. He did not know the truth yet of what might be trusted and believed. There was much in his mind to be made sense of. But since the wurox had tried to steal him away, there was one thing of which he was sure. He wanted most to fly free of the Goddess and her tool, the ugly red man with whom he was forced to keep company.

If he was not as blithe as he pretended to be, he was happier in his anticipation of escape than he had been at any other time in this prisoning dream. And he waited like an archer with a hard target, seeking the right moment of wind and light to pull and loose his arrow. He the archer, he the bow, he the arrow, all in one.

His gnarly shadow lagged and wilted. Noll was even slower today than he had been yesterday. Haldane did not know whether it was one more trick to throw him off guard, or whether Noll the Tool truly failed. He listened to him choke and cough and he made the pace harder, hoping that he might outwalk the old man and leave him far behind.

But when he was thirty paces ahead, Noll called for him to slow. "Not so fast. Not so fast. I am not able to keep up with you."

Did he play with Haldane?

"I thought you wished for me not to drag?" Haldane said in all false innocence. "I but do my best to please you."

"Aye, Haldane. Giles. I must remember to call you that always until we are safe. And you, to call me Noll."

"Be content," Haldane said. He tapped his head. "You are Noll in my mind even now. I have you."

"Good. Remember that when it matters. When we set out this morning, I did not know how tired I was. My bones are water. I cannot march like a soldier."

"What kind of soldier marches?" asked Haldane. "Any soldier worth the name rides."

Like the best of bad servants, he teased and joked and laughed to prove his constancy. But soon enough again, he was twenty paces ahead of Noll and the old man was wilting under the weight of the pack.

"Stop," he said. "I must catch my breath."

So they halted, and when they rose again, Noll gave the pack over. But Haldane still led the way, setting the pace with his lighter feet. The pack was nothing to him.

This was not yet the time for escape. The hills were too close and steep and set about with tangles of trees and brush. Haldane did not mean to run away into wilderness and lose himself.

The second time they rested was no better. Haldane contented himself to set too brisk a march, not quite enough to earn complaint, but stiff enough to weary this wander-eyed untrustable man, and make him unwary. When they came upon the proper place, Haldane would know it and call the halt himself.

And in time they came upon a jamble

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of high grey rocks, the Pellardy Road passing by on one side, a trail angling past on the other to find its own way south into the hills.

And the place said to Haldane, "Here I am. Make use of me." For facing the road there was a natural shelter tucked under the rocks, that many men had used for a camp since the world was new. They came upon it as the wind began to speckle them again with finger flicks of wetness. Wind and rain said to him, "Haldane, we are with you, too." Haldane heard them and rejoiced in spite of all fear and apprehension.

He did not ask Noll if he was ready to rest again. He did not trust himself to speak. He simply led the way off the road without a word, and the man who dogged his heels followed ten paces behind, saying,"Hey, it's Leaning Rock. It is marked on my map. I remember it."

Did Noll pretend? Did Noll suspect? What would he do when he found Haldane gone? Would he wait until Haldane was ready to flee and then reveal himself? Haldane's stomach was clenched so tightly that he could hardly breathe.

Noll hurried his pace so that by the time Haldane was under the great rock loom where the ground was dry and out of wind and weather, the old man was beside him. And when Haldane had swung his bag down from his shoulder and seated himself, Noll was there before him, heaving great breaths like a blown horse.

Haldane felt like Wisolf the Cunning outside the tent of his enemy. This was the moment.

He forced a smile and said, "Here we are. Shelter for us, rain for the rest of the world. Just as we said."

Sailor Noll said, "We must not rest here too long and spend our day on nothing. Only a minute. Unless the rain becomes too hard, Giles."

But he sounded as though he wished the rain to grow hard. He leaned back with a sigh, putting his head on his bag, which he shifted and plumped until it was comfortable, moving one small hard lump until it ceased to annoy.

Haldane held his tongue in check while he counted ten. He would not be too swift with his words.

"We'll wait and see if it does," he said. "Now is the time for our enemies to suffer while we have good shelter over our heads." Then he said with what he hoped was easiness, "Hey, I'll tell you—let me step forth and test the wind. I need to piss anyway. I'll judge the weather."

He had not relieved his bladder all the morning long to make this excuse water-tight when his moment came. He hardly dared to look at Noll. He rose from the ground without use of his hands. They were his danger. They wanted to touch his body and be sure that all that he had hung about him was still safely there. The things that mattered. Knife, horn, string. The things that made Haldane. His fingers itched for his boar's tooth.

He shot one look at Noll because he could not help himself. Noll's eyes seemed to be closed.

Haldane stepped outside into the light sprinkle that was spatting the earth. He put his hands to work. He held them out under the rain and

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cocked his head as though considering what they told him, then turned left out of sight around the rocks.

Before him lay the trail into the hills. Haldane wanted to run, but he did not immediately take to his heels. He needed to piss too badly.

He outdid the rain in wetting the base of a tree. All the while he kept an eye turned over his shoulder, looking for Noll. His heart fluttered and he looked of a sudden to the other side of the rocks, expecting to see the old man standing over there, watching him, smiling at his simplicity in believing he could escape.

The wind and rain blew harder, shoving at him to be gone, but he could not go. He pushed at the piss until his penis hurt. He stood there for an agonizingly long time, his head switching from one side of the rocks to the other. But Noll did not show himself.

And then he was empty. Then he was free to run. He took the path, panting with relief, feeling surer and happier than he had at any time since he could bring himself to remember.

That was only two days. It seemed half his lifetime.

He ran, and every step said he was not Giles. He was Haldane. He was free. He was Haldane. He was himself. He was Haldane. Haldane, Haldane, Haldane.

Rain, wind, earth, rocks, trees, broken path. Haldane at one with them. Never Giles. He pushed Giles out of his mind.

He ran until the tumbled rock pile beside the Pellardy Road was far behind him. He pounded up the hillside trail until the breath was harsh in his throat and there were needles in his chest. He ran, half-afraid, half-convinced that he would turn a corner in the angling rock-fractured path and find Sailor Noll waiting for him, laughing at him, playing with him. That was Libera's way in all of this—to toy with him like a Get carl loose among the playthings of the West.

At the best of times, Haldane was more used to ride than to run. First his calves began to bind and then his lungs failed him and at last he fell to a walk. The slope of the path before him increased and he pushed at his thighs with his hands, whoofing and panting. At last he caught at a rock and leaned against it for a moment, eyes closed, before pressing on.

From then on there was neither looking back nor fearing what was ahead. There was only walking. And as time passed and Haldane walked higher into the hills, his heart lightened. He began to believe that he was free. There was only himself all alone in this rain-sodden world. This was the end of the evil spell that had gripped him for so long. They might do what they wished with him, play with him, lie to him, beat and harry him, but he was Haldane Hardhead, Haldane the Stubborn, and he knew his own power. He had proved it.

He laughed. Oh, they should have known better than to test their wiles on the son of Black Morca! They would know now.

It continued to rain. He wiped his forehead with his fingers. He was wet clear through his own clothes beneath the illusion and in some moments he could feel them binding and chafing.

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But he did not mind the rain. It had been a good friend to him this day.

Or so he told himself. But when he turned a corner in the trail and saw the first tumbled house of the village, his thoughts were immediately of shelter. He found he did mind the rain when there was promise of something better.

Then in the second moment he turned around and around, caught in a dance of wonder, marveling at what he saw about him. This distant village was dead, an empty silent unpeopled shell.

Nowhere within it did four walls stand together. Haldane saw fallen roofs. He saw stones thrown down. He saw charred beams glistening blackly in the rain. And he saw trees springing up again amongst the ruins, as though log walls, shattered and scattered, had in dying given birth to new strong children.

The destruction was complete. It was good Gettish work. Since Haldane had never raided into the West, it was the best he had ever seen.

He knew this place for what it was, though he had never seen one before, but only heard stories. It was a Wild Village.

Long, long ago, in Garulf's time, the Gets had not ruled in the duchies of Nestor. They had been but guests, content to live in Nestor and accept its tribute, as they did even today in Pellardy in the south. And that had been well. Then, in the dark days after Stone Heath, when the Gets seemed weak and unable to help themselves, the nobles of Nestor had risen up and rebelled and refused to pay their lawful tribute. It was only after that, when the dukes were dead or were fled into the West, that the Gets had learned to rule in Nestor. They had gathered all the people of the land close under their hands so that they might be better ruled. But there were some peasants who resisted and ran away into the hills and made new villages there. These were the Wild Villages.

All were in ruins now, burned, torn down and broken long ago. Haldane thought it strange of fate that such a place should give him shelter now. He sat himself down on the dry side of a wall, comfortably out of the rain, which now, so late, was waning, and began to rest, think and plan.

There was much in his mind to be put in place. There was much to be decided. But at least he was himself again, no longer Giles the Nestorian, no longer the plaything of the Goddess.

While he leaned his back against the logs and thought, he picked a stalk of field grass and absently stripped it apart. When he had only a straw left, a bit longer than his finger, he picked up a tiny spider with it. He watched it closely as it ran back and forth from one end to the other as he tipped the straw. Back and forth. Back and forth. He smiled to see it scramble.

As he was absorbed in this pursuit, there came a sudden startling hard hand on Haldane's shoulder, shaking him. He looked up to see the great looming bearded face of a wild man. The man was dressed in skins, his wet hair stood out in spikes, and he carried an ax in his hand. Haldane jumped to his feet in terror, dropping straw and spider.

He had never seen anyone like this before. It was a strange and frightening

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sight, a high-smelling bogey appeared out of the stories his nurses had told him when he was small. Was he so soon back in the hands of the spirits he thought he had escaped?

"What are you doing here, boy?" the apparition said in Nestorian. "Who are you?"

Haldane drew himself up and faced the bogey. He would not deny himself. Not again.

He said, "I am Haldane, the son of Black Morca!"

The apparition laughed.

14

In late afternoon, the clouds that had been dooming the day broke at last into great floes and sailed apart. That was while Oliver was following the hill path that led down into the glen where Duke Girard lay encamped. On his heels were the two boy outlaws who had come upon him in his great confusion after he awoke alone at Leaning Rock. These boys still wore clothes sewn by their mothers, though oversewn with patches of experience. The day continued cool in cloud and tree shadow, but in other moments bright. Grasses shivered then in sunlight and Oliver must narrow his eyes.

Oliver appeared the knobby sailor, Old Noll, he of the pendulous earlobes and the hairy nostrils, he of the red hair and the eye cocked on another world. At this moment, Oliver did not just wear Sailor Noll as a mask. He did his best to be Sailor Noll, to be no more than Sailor Noll, a man of no consequence. He had not done any of those simple things Oliver knew that would win him free of these outlaws minor. He did not wish to win free. He had welcomed their arrival.

Oliver sought the comfort of a fire, a fair portion, a place for his head, and time to regain his mind's balance. In return, he might offer the news of the day as it had come to a land-bound sailor walking the long road home from Eduna to Jedburke. Sailor Noll had said what was necessary to persuade these two damp lads to leave off their patrol and bring him and his news back to the warm and dry of camp. They had welcomed the persuasion.

This winter camp, tucked away in the range of hills that rose like a hedgerow between Morca and Arngrim, was the center of Duke Girard's power. Girard was he who would have been ruler of Bary if the Gets had never come. He had been raised in exile in Palsance and was now returned to live at the edges of Gettish vision in his home hills of Bary, where he commanded fifty men among whom were more boys than just these two. They named themselves soldiers of the duke.

They had no more than reached the edge of camp, Sailor Noll and the two young soldiers, passed through by the watch, when they were set upon by a lank man whose many more patches were token of his greater authority. Camp was a well-used clearing, and there were more than fifty, men and women both, in camp today. They wore rude and simple clothes, and some even wore the skins of animals. So much Oliver could see at this distance.

The lank man was angry. He swore at the boys and said, "I will see you whipped. Will none of you follow

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orders? I put you wood-lice on the Pellardy Road until dark! Is this darkness?"

"Be you calm, Rab," the smaller boy said pertly. "We bring news for the duke."

Rab was not calm, nor ready to be told to be. Oliver paid the noise no mind, waiting for it to cease. He looked away. A dozen women, as many old as young, played camp wife around the smoky fires. Men sat, worked or played there in the glen in the glowing blue and orange of the cool late after-rain.

He was not much of an Oliver, that powerful man of magic, this fugitive Oliver. He was no man of whom Gets must be wary. He was a man of no consequence. He was content to be mere Sailor Noll and go where mere Sailor Noll would go. He ached to sit.

The world of his mind was as strange now as Haldane's. From the time that he was a boy, Oliver had been acquainted with his failings. He was self-bound to narrow practice. He was indolent. He was timorous. He excused himself from much.

Nonetheless, he would not be stayed from walking at large in the world. He had countered his failings with his strengths. Agility was his chief strength, and he had forced his agility to carry him where diligence and courage and breadth alone would have failed him. Agility had made Oliver into Morca's wizard and adviser, the one man of magic amongst the Gets. Naught else but agility could have done so much.

And once he had found his balance there among the Gets, that was a safe and easy time, the years with Morca, the first that Oliver had known since he was young. He had let himself forget that he had bade goodby to safety and ease when he left home. He had let himself forget that narrow practice was his failing and practiced narrowly. He had lost himself in study, lost himself in thought and question, paused for a moment in dream while he wondered where his youth had flown and wither he was bound. To what end had he been born? And while he was occupied so in reverie, he had lost his balance.

Oliver had tricked Oliver and received a blow from Oliver that had set Oliver down. Where was order? His world was broken. His mind ran on its own heels in subtle circles.

He knew not what to trust, or what to believe, or what to do. Small things were disturbing—like Haldane's dream and the trail of the wurox. He knew not what they meant. He did not know what was important and what was not—and in this event, how could he make up his mind to anything?

Oh, if instead of practicing narrowly in his cell, Oliver had truly studied to know the meaning of small signs, like the presence of kings and witches, then Morca might be alive. The world might be whole. And Oliver might still be safe and happy practicing narrowly in his cell. What of that?

But when this Rab, this lank sergeant of outlaws, loomed over Oliver and said, "What is your news, old man? I will be the judge of it," Oliver was not so lost that he could not wither him with one squint of his odd eye. If this Rab could be defied by two wee boy outlaws, he was not a man meant to be Sailor Noll's master.

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"None of yours to know," said Oliver. "My news is for the duke."

And as they made their progress through the camp, Oliver gained confidence in this small game he was playing in the guise of Sailor Noll. This was a camp hungry for news if not for meat. Men called to ask what was afoot as they walked, and when the two boy outlaws said it was news, they hurried to swell the progress. Sailor Noll with his news was a safe and simple size to be.

"Is it Mainard returned?" some asked.

And others, the rougher men in skins, said: "Is there to be drink at last?"

The Duke Girard, rightful heir to Bary in the eyes of some, stood separated from other men, his back to a great standing stone, an ancient raised tongue of rock placed alone there where they camped. Nearby him were several leaders of outlaws, commoner men, come here to confer, and to eat and drink with Girard. Beyond Girard's shoulder, close by the rock, stood a strange Man of the Woods, one of those who were the first people of Nestor, one of different breed than all the others here. His hair was fine and black, and his robes were brown. And so they all gathered; the party with news and those they had attracted, the outlaw leaders standing together, the strange Man of the Woods standing apart, and Girard alone in their midst.

Girard was a pretty and well-made youth with the air of a dream-walker lost in some dream other. Among these men, Girard was singular in fashion and dress. He wore his hair long after the style of the Western courts and his clothes were Western clothes of Palsance that had not survived the winter whole. His singularity was one of the proofs by which Girard commanded his fifty loyal men.

Thus it was that as the sun set, Oliver stood before young Girard and divers other outlaws. The price of a night's hospitality was on his tongue and his true self was invisible, and he was content to have it so.

If Oliver had been fully Oliver, he might have worried over the meaning of the raised rock. This place was an old place, and old places are not the same as new places. Oliver might have worried over the rock and its seeming guardian man in his robes of brown.

Sailor Noll only managed to take in Duke Girard, his back to a stone that stood taller than he. But he was enough Oliver to know before a word was spoken that Sailor Noll could take in Duke Girard indeed. He could see it in Duke Girard's bearing.

"Lord, here is one who claims news for you," said lank Rab. "I think he is a vagrom who would lie to have the advantage of your table."

One of the two young soldiers of the duke suddenly declined responsibility for Sailor Noll. He leaned toward those around him to seem one of them. But the other young outlaw saw in Duke Girard something of what Oliver saw. He smiled and stood tall behind queer-looking Sailor Noll.

"We share with all who visit us, Rab. My table is open to all of Bary. I am duke."

"Yes, lord," said Rab.

"Nay, I do mean it, Rab."

"Yes, lord."

"Is it news of the train to Palsance?"

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asked Girard. He smiled. "We all shall be less cross when the ambock has arrived. And my wardrobe."

"Lord, he has not said what his news is, if news he has," said Rab.

"I should not have guessed," said Girard. "Who are you, strange old man, and with what news have you been sent to me?"

Oliver said, "My name is Noll and I am an old sailor walking the road from Eduna to Jedburke. My lord."

"If you must be a sailor, I will accept that," said Girard. "Or is that part of the message?"

It suddenly became evident to Oliver that this dreamy-eyed young boy saw him as a portent. Girard saw through Sailor Noll, not to Oliver behind, but to words of import clothed in strange human form. And with a sudden surge of heart, Oliver realized that Girard saw truly. Sailor Noll, with his news, was a portent in this camp.

Sailor Noll became a portent. He swung his sack down to the ground. On the instant, he changed his bearing. Without being any less Sailor Noll, he took on stature. He expanded his will. And all present but the Man of the Woods and Girard himself fell back a pace from the sight of ugly shy-eyed Sailor Noll. The Man of the Woods cocked his head on his shoulder and watched. Noll steadfastly. It seemed the life of these outlaws was not his life, and great news for them was not great news for him, a man of other kind. As for Girard, he bravely held his ground before momentous words.

Oliver signed the sign that commands silence and grave attention from all men. His arm outstretched, his hand raised, thumb a-cock, forefinger pointing high.

He said: "Once there was a king, a barbarian tyrant. Because his skin was as black as a frog, they called him the Black King."

And he told the story of Morca and Morca's banquet and Morca's head as though it had happened in another land many years ago. He made a place for Duke Girard in the story.

And when he finished, the outlaws asked each other, "What does this mean?" They did not know of what Oliver spoke because the names had not been Nestor and the Gets and Lothor of Chastain and Black Morca. They looked into each other's faces to see the meaning of what they heard. Some thought it was an aimless story. Some thought it was a riddle. Some thought it was news of strange foreign politics.

As the outlaws looked to each other, Girard put his face in both hands against the force of the words of power this gnarly messenger had borne to him. He believed that he understood the story and who it was who came after the black usurper king. He put his face in his hands to think, but he did not cover his eyes. The words he had heard were weightier than any he had invited to hear.

He dropped his hands and asked his portent: "Is it Black Morca who is dead?"

The wildest of the hill outlaws, not a leader of anyone, but one who stood by himself, said: "What is this news? Does he say that my old enemy, the Hammer of Gradis is dead?"

"If this be true, then our day's plan-

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ning is spent for nothing," said one of the leader men.

"Black Morca is dead," said Oliver.

Girard, in strange mind, spread his hands. His hands trembled and his face rolled. His soldiers knew that this was the sign he made before he spoke the words by which they were guided. Strangers to the camp, who knew Duke Girard best by repute, watched in wonder.

He said in a clear and even voice: "If the barbarian king is Morca, then I am the boy Jehan. I am the new Jehannes!" And his face lit with an inner light. "I wish Mainard were here so that I might tell him."

He said: "Listen to me, my men. Black Morca is dead and his head sits on a pole like a cabbage! The Gets have fallen on each other with the fury of their own battle pigs. Now is the moment for us to strike them as we may. I am the heir of Jehannes. I will rule Bary. I will rule the world. Have faith and follow me."

And the men stirred at that. And then they continued to stir. Someone was arrived, and a cry went up! "Mainard! It is Mainard!" The outlaws fell away and in the still half-light another young man, of cut similar to Girard but wearing a new coat, came running in, stopped, panted once lightly for effect, and threw his arms wide to show himself off for inspection. Then he and Girard made the noises made when good friends meet again, and fell to hugging each other.

Girard said, "I am the new Jehannes. I'm going to lead us to strike against the Gets wherever we may find them."

Mainard said, "I was so hoping I would find you crowding the fires before dinner so that you might truly admire the clothes that I wear. Not in this murk."

"No, my good friend Mainard. Hear me: Black Morca is dead. He has been struck down by his fellows and the Gets now rip each other recklessly. We have been given a moment and we must act on the moment we have been given."

Mainard fell back. He said: "This explains much. The country is aswarm with Gets. We had to dig a cache and leave the greater part behind us. I could not bring you your wardrobe. You will have to look at me and dream. Why do we stand here? We could be eating."

"Only to gather strength," said Girard.

"That I will do," said Mainard.

"Did you bring nothing with you from Palsance?" the outlaw men asked.

"Nothing but the ambock," said Mainard.

And the men all cried hurray and turned for supper. And there the kegs of dark brew were. Oliver followed behind, his moment as portent complete, his meal, his beer and his place as close by the fire as he liked all earned. He remembered ambock from other days and he could taste it now.

Jana, the moon, showed half her face in the sky overhead, but her eyes were unveiled. She watched all in silence.

15

SAILOR NOLL sat without company at the farthest glimmer of the fire circle. His bag was by his leg where he could be sure of it. He had a well-filled plate on his lap, with a thick slice of good

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meat. A jack of dark beer sat on the ground before him. He was alone because there was no man nor woman in this company that did not feel that he was best left by himself. That was a safe space in which Sailor Noll could eat his meal as though it were the world-in-all and drink his good dark beer. Oliver attended to the camp only with his ears.

The air at his back was cool and only lightly stirring. He got but hints from the fire, but was content. The night was close behind his ears. The meat was as good as Morca's meat. Oliver was well-content to sit and fill himself. He did not look up even when he sipped and savored his beer. He did listen.

This was a restless camp. There was much moving to and fro, voices were quick and intense. He could hear much drinking and the rowdy games born of much drinking. Women laughed. The wild men proved their wildness. There were many arrivals.

He heard Girard speak to his friend Mainard of being the new Jehannes as it was prophecied. And he heard Mainard answer as though he was but biding his own moment to talk.

He heard a woman shriek and then laugh. And then he heard a man protest and many laugh.

He did not hear the Man of the Woods. Almost he looked to find him.

He heard the wild outlaw who had spoken of Morca as the Hammer of Gradis boast of the Gets he would kill.

A woman came to him and asked him if he would have more beer. Without looking at her, he held his cup to be filled.

He heard great tumult, laughter and hooting as many chased one around the campfire and threw him down and beat him. And then there was a turnabout.

He heard many wild outlaws boast of the beer they would drink.

There was a serious fight and one was hurt.

He heard Girard speak to his friend Mainard of his clothes from Palsance that were left behind in the cache and other things. And he heard Mainard say, to avoid answer: "With so many Gets about, we may find one or two to kill, if we be careful."

Duke Girard said then: "Mainard, my friend, be serious. With Morca dead, I am certain that this must be the moment to strike at the Gets. But now I am asking you of what is being worn at Richard's court and who is being talked about and what is being said of my poems."

But after that, Oliver opened his eyes and came to his feet. He left his place of silent attention behind. For suddenly, as Duke Girard spoke, there was one more arrival in the great fire circle. And there was a voice that said, "I am Haldane, the son of Black Morca! I will kill all you dream creatures!"

The voice was not the voice of Haldane. The voice was the voice of Giles, the strange grandson of old Sailor Noll.

Oliver opened his eyes to see Giles the peasant boy, Giles the fool, the young simpleton in his smock. He was gripped by a great wild outlaw dressed in animal skins. This one threw Giles to the ground before Duke Girard.

"He says that he is the son of Black Morca. When I spoke of you, he wished to fight, Haldane against Girard, so I brought him here to you."

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"I am the son of Black Morca. I am Haldane. Had I my sword, I would have slain you, wild man."

Drunken men cheered at the audacity of this silly boy's words. As Oliver stood, he saw the Man of the Woods rise to the boy's assistance. The man of strange feature and fine black hair knelt to brush the dirt away. But though he beat at the smock of the Nestorian boy, Oliver's spell held true.

Girard looked down at the boy sprawled before the fire. "You say you are the son of the King of the Gets."

"Do you not believe he is, my lord?" asked Oliver. He was become portent again. His plate was cast aside. His jack was upset. He recked for nothing. "You have been warned, but warned for nought. Now, listen whilst you are warned again. This is a Nestorian boy, a simple lad. But this boy is inhabited by the voice of Haldane, the son of Black Morca. What he says, Haldane would say. Harken to him. Contest with him if you would be heir of Jehannes."

The man in brown, the Man of the Woods, withdrew attention from himself then. He became nobody and was not in sight. And so also the wild outlaw. Haldane stood and looked to Duke Girard. And then to Oliver. He raged around and pointed in a circle to all the standing men.

"I will kill all here," said Haldane.

In front of the man of portent, he said, "I know you. I know you, Sailor Noll. I will kill you first, devious one. Are you master of the dream?"

Duke Girard stepped forth then, casting off Mainard's restraining hand. He had his look of lostness with him again, as though he saw in leagues but not in lesser distances.

"Do you dream, too?" asked Girard.

"Who are you?" asked Haldane.

"I dream I am Girard. It is very strange to be Girard. What do you dream?"

"I dream. . . I dream. . . I do not know what I dream. I think I dream that. . . No. I do not know what I dream, but I know that I dream."

"But you are Haldane?"

"I am Haldane! Yes. I am Haldane."

Girard smiled then, a slow sweet smile. He stepped boldly. His men cheered him. Some threw ale and wounding words at the boy who spoke for Haldane. Even the wild men watched Girard with new respect, thinking they might become soldiers rather than outlaws.

For Girard said, "In my dream, Morca is dead and his head sits on a sharpened stake."

And Haldane screamed and shook his head and fell to his knees. He struck at the ground with his hands.

Men cried at him: "We will kill Haldane and all Gets," and "We will throw you to the ground as your father threw your mother," and "The Gets eat dogs."

This last must hurt Haldane because the Gets would not eat dog and did not like those who did.

Girard said, "In my dream, Haldane must hide from all other Gets who will kill him. But Girard leads his soldiers against the Gets and sweeps them away in the name of the Goddess, and all holy inspiration. I am the Prince of Bary, the heir of Jehannes who came of Bary. You are no prince. You are not

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even a baron. If I knew where you were in truth, and not just in word, I would kill you as I would a beetle, with the heel of my shoe."

Haldane said, "I am a baron. I am a baron." But then the stupid peasant boy face he wore broke into pieces in the most comical way. "But my army is dead."

And the outlaws all laughed at him in his bewilderment and grief.

Haldane looked at Sailor Noll, who stood silently watching. He scrambled toward him over the ground like a piglet in panic.

Haldane said to Sailor Noll: "If you are the dream master, will you not make the whirling stop? I cannot hold on to anything and I am confused."

Gay young Girard called, "If you are the dream master, my sailor, then let the dream play on. I know now who I really am, and I thank you. I am grateful." He laughed.

All Duke Girard's soldiers cried for him and longed for Gets to kill. They would become an army, a state, more than a state.

Mainard called in joy, "I am your good right hand, Girard. I am your good right hand."

Girard said, "You doubted me."

"I do not doubt you now."

"Then shred your coat," said Girard.

But such was the force of passion here that Mainard stripped the coat from his back in the instant of Girard's words. He had a knife out and he laid the coat to the ground in strips and pieces.

Girard stood over Haldane, who lay at the feet of Sailor Noll. Girard said, "You cannot face me in my glory. I have bound myself to Libera and I will rule the world and write poems to her. Do you not see?" And he pointed to the fine court coat of Palsance that was now rags as it were proof. "I am Libera's Liege. I am the heir of Jehannes."

Haldane the fool, Haldane the double fool, Haldane the fool of the fool of the world; Haldane, in the guise of the Nestorian boy, Giles—he who had been struck by a swinging boom when he was small, he whose eye was like a staring agate: Haldane gazed at Duke Girard, Libera's Liege, the heir of Jehannes, and at crooked Sailor Noll, the portent, the master of the dream, as these two stood above him, and knew that he was helpless.

It was wrong. It was not right. He said, "But she told me I was Libera's Liege. I understand nothing. I understand nothing."

Then he cried, "Libera, free me!" in a voice that was all his agony.

He fainted then. After a moment, he relaxed as he lay and betrayed himself, wetting his smock before the whole camp of outlaws.

Girard looked down at the incontinent Nostorian peasant boy who lay as dead. Then he turned to his friend Mainard, standing on the rags of his court coat.

"You saw it all," young Girard said. "Am I the heir of Jehannes, or am I not?"

Mainard nodded.

Duke Girard turned to Sailor Noll: "I am, am I not?"

Sailor Noll nodded.

The soldiers of the duke all cried their passions. They cheered Girard for

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his dream, and they drank to him. They drank into the night, and some of them kicked Haldane. Haldane did not protest. He lay on the ground and moaned, and sometimes his limbs twitched.

When Haldane awoke, it was some other time. He lay on the hard cold ground. The camp was as silent as a winter grave. All the outlaws did not move, nor could Haldane hear them breathe. They slept as the dead sleep under their warm snow blankets, without turning.

The moon was set, her eyes no longer witness. Only the Get Fathers watched from above, their distant stare brilliant and crystalline. They had never reached Haldane when he had striven to call upon them. Perhaps they had never tried to come. Perhaps he had never called aright.

The wind died suddenly.

The fire embers, red a moment before, ceased to glow.

Haldane's heart stilled in anticipation. All his life, it seemed to him, had been a mystery. He understood none of it. All that had seemed secure, seemed secure no longer, as though it had become past mystery antecedent to present mystery. And this moment was the sum of all those that had come before it. This moment he was in the presence of total mystery. He knew nothing. He was nothing. He was helpless, and he sat up, spread his arms, hands upward, and opened his mouth in gaping helplessness.

He was surrendered.

And in that instant, his heart was struck like so much ice on the anvil of a smith. And he was become Haldane again—Haldane the whirly-headed, who reserved from surrender.

For as he sat helpless, of a sudden a light but powerful grip seized his chin from behind and a finger skated over his teeth like single foot on winter ice.

"In truth, I do believe that you are marked as Mine, though I had doubted it," said a voice. It was the rich firm voice of a woman of command, like a Nestorian nurse when he was small or his mother.

In cold fear, Haldane turned to see who it was treating him so. The hair on his neck prickled. He saw a giant woman's body, but One who was not a woman. He saw warts and growths and thought of the horrid snow monkeys of which Oliver had told him, and of nightmare pigs. But She was more whelming than either. She was more than he could bear.

"Are you Libera?" he asked. "Are you the one I dread?"

The Thing-Woman gobbled hideously. Haldane looked about him, but no one roused at the sound. All continued to lie silent and still.

If this was Libera, then this light by which he could see her more clearly than night should allow was Libera's light, and this time in which all slept but Haldane was Libera's time. The face of the creature altered before Haldane's sight and became such that Haldane must look away, then back, then away again. His limbs were boneless before Her and he disgraced himself again, bright and hot on his leg.

"You are as artless as the flimsy cantrip you hide under," She said. "Poor wee warrior." She laughed or cried again, and Her various growths shook

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like colored caterpillars in the wind. "You should be abed. It is late. Come ride My horse until you sleep and I will judge you. I will see whether you are Mine, or whether you are yours, or whether you are Someone Else's. Come horsie, come, give infant Giles a lullaby ride."

Haldane could not even say, "I am not Giles! I am Haldane!" His mouth would not work.

He cowered before Her. His eyes were lowered to the ground because he could not bear the sight of Her. He heard the sound of Her steed as it picked its way through the camp and he feared to look upon the beast. Its sound was clopping, seeming aimless, slowly wandering. Then it ceased. She—Libera?—made the noise She made once again then, as though that were the call by which She fetched Her horse. Closer it ambled. It stopped. Was it here? Where was it?

When Haldane could not bear waiting longer, he looked up at Her. And when he looked at Her, She, the great Thing-Woman, gestured to Her night-horse. She gobbled again, her face bright blue and red in the darkness that surrounded them. But there was not the sound of hooves again. Instead, at that moment, there was hot moist breath on Haldane's neck.

He started hugely and scrambled about. Libera's horsie was limned as brightly as milk in twilight. Her steed was the great wurox cow, head lowered. It was larger than any natural animal. Libera and her beast made Haldane feel smaller than small again, as he had when the world was huge. The wurox gazed at Haldane and looked as though she might speak. She opened her mouth and lowed. He could not bear the sound.

Libera seized him suddenly in a grip that took no account of his dignity or manliness. She whirled him through the air and set him down on the broad felt back of Her white cow. The cow shook her head. There was no purchase and Haldane felt that he was about to fall from a great height, and was frantic. He was aswim. He scrambled to help himself, but could find no help.

"You must ride around my old standing stone like thread around a spool," said Libera, She of hideous aspect. And She gestured at the rock which Haldane could suddenly see, standing like a brother by the camp.

"You must ride around it three times, and if you fall off, I will eat you alive," said She. "I would you held on tight." And She put Her face close to Haldane, showed Her white teeth in their dark red gums and made Her lures to jump and jiggle.

The cow began to step, and Haldane cried in desperation, "I cannot even ride so far," tears starting from his eyes. He was tossed like a die, like a mouse by a cat, like a snowflake on the wind.

"You must ride so far," She said, "if you would be my Lover."

It was ferocious logic and Haldane could not withstand its force. He could not hold on for there was nothing to hold onto. He must be thrown. He would be devoured. He chose to be devoured, and found that when he did not strive to hold on, he did not slip. He was tossed lightly on the broad back of the white wurox as though he were a

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feather juggled on a coverlet. The wurox halted when they reached Libera's standing stone. But he would *not* be Libera's Lover.

Libera then said to Haldane: "You are Mine. You would have fallen and I would have ground your bones in My teeth if you were not Mine. You will love and serve Me. You were marked rightly as My child."

She touched Haldane's brow by his right eye most tenderly then, and the touch was like a wasp walking.

"But you are not yet ripe," She said. "Now is not yet the time for you to ride alone around my standing stone. You are not yet the man to ride alone around my standing stone. But still you shall ride. I will ride with you."

She leaped onto the back of the wurox behind Haldane. And the wurox ran as no cow could run, faster than the swiftest horse, faster than a skycatcher, faster than thought, around the tongue of the stone. At this speed, Haldane could have been no feather juggled. He must have fallen. But the grip on him that held him secure and steady was no more than a fingertouch. Haldane felt Her great presence behind him as they sped so fast he could not see over distances he could not reckon.

His heart surged within him and She said, "You will not be My Lover until you deny the Gets."

They crossed great leaps. Time was forgotten.

He expanded and She said, "You will not be ripe until you deny Morca."

He was warm. He rocked.

In fullness, She said, "You will not be Giles until you deny Haldane."

Sleepily, he said, "But you know I cannot do that, Mother. I am Haldane."

The last thing he remembered was that Libera said: "When next we meet, it will be in other light." But also She gobbled once and it almost made him wake.

When Haldane did wake, it was morning, just before dawn. The air was cool and clear, and so was he himself. Birds were singing. He was sitting on a height, his back resting against a firm support, and his neck and head, too. From where he sat, fields and forests were to be seen stretching below like a tapestry with a pattern, and as he saw the pattern, the first light of the sun swung from the heavens and made his eyes to blink.

He smiled and looked to see Oliver sitting beside him, his back also against the wood of a stockade fence. Oliver—short, plump, white-bearded, winter-thicketed—wore magenta satinet with many rents. He was striking a light with his firepump and applying it to his clay pipe, which he puffed until it was lit as he would have it. Then he nodded to Haldane and commenced to smoke.

Haldane was Haldane. He was himself as he had been before Oliver's spell. He touched his head where he was wounded. He felt no wound, but a healed scar.

He said, "I know that tapestry." He stood awkwardly, scrambling to his feet, and finding his legs asleep from sitting.

He said, "I know this place from my dreams."

He unstrung the horn from around his neck and blew it again and again. He pointed to the gate against which

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they sat. He swept his arm wide and pointed to the country.

"This is my grandfather Arngrim's dun." Haldane said. "This is Little Nail."

Oliver came to his feet and put out his pipe hurriedly. Haldane, the son of Black Morca, called and blew his horn before the gate of his mother's father, Arngrim. And in time the gate was unbarred.

It swung open. Standing before them were Arngrim, who was once most trusted by Garmund, and Ivor Fisheye, that dagger man.

—TO BE CONCLUDED—
—ALEXEI & CORY PANSHIN

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Iron Mountain (Cont. from page 39)

forced open the door and allowed Jean to enter first. The outer windows had been broken and a light gentle wind rushed mildly in. Chou stepped to the very edge and, leaning out, gripping the handrail with one hand, tried to see the street below. But the black cloud was thick and impenetrable.

"Look up," said Jean, from beside him.

He did, and as he did, the cloud above suddenly parted. And he saw the sun: the great white flaming disc. But then, as quickly as it had come, the sun was gone. He whispered, "No," and a gray cloud came, different from the ugly blackness of before.

"It will be all right," said Jean. "Watch."

The gray cloud opened, and from within it, spinning, fluttering, falling, came the white flakes. They came toppling down from the sky, floating gently toward the hidden ground below, glistening brightly, just beyond his reach.

"Chou! It's snowing! Oh look! It is!"

Chou reached out farther. Barely holding by one hand, he leaned far out over the invisible city, his hand grasping, pleading, the fluttering flakes so near. Then he had one. He felt it. The chilling moistness melted upon his outstretched palm, then another and another. He felt the tears stinging his eyes as the snow came furiously down, covering his forehead, stinging his face, blinding his eyes. Crying, he could not see as the cold benevolent blanket of the falling snow wrapped him kindly in its last warm loving embrace.

"Oh!" cried Jean, from somewhere inside him. "The snow! Chou! See the snow!"

—GORDON EKLUND

What I Did (Cont. from page 44)

parchment scroll, unrolling across the Cinemascope screen. They are beautiful and were hand drawn by Tibetan monks. They represent the life work of seven people and I owe it to them to show you what they say.

They read like a fortune cookie:

THAT'S ALL FOLKS is what they say.

I think this is pretty funny and I start to say something about it but everybody has gone to Texas and the credits have blurred into a yawning cavity on a tooth of the wolverine who is about fifteen inches from completing his leap. His mouth is wide open and his lips have turned back revealing jagged, uneven teeth set in red and black jaws. His breath smells bad.

Look at this, I want to say.

But I don't have time.

—JACK C. HALDEMAN II

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WESSO

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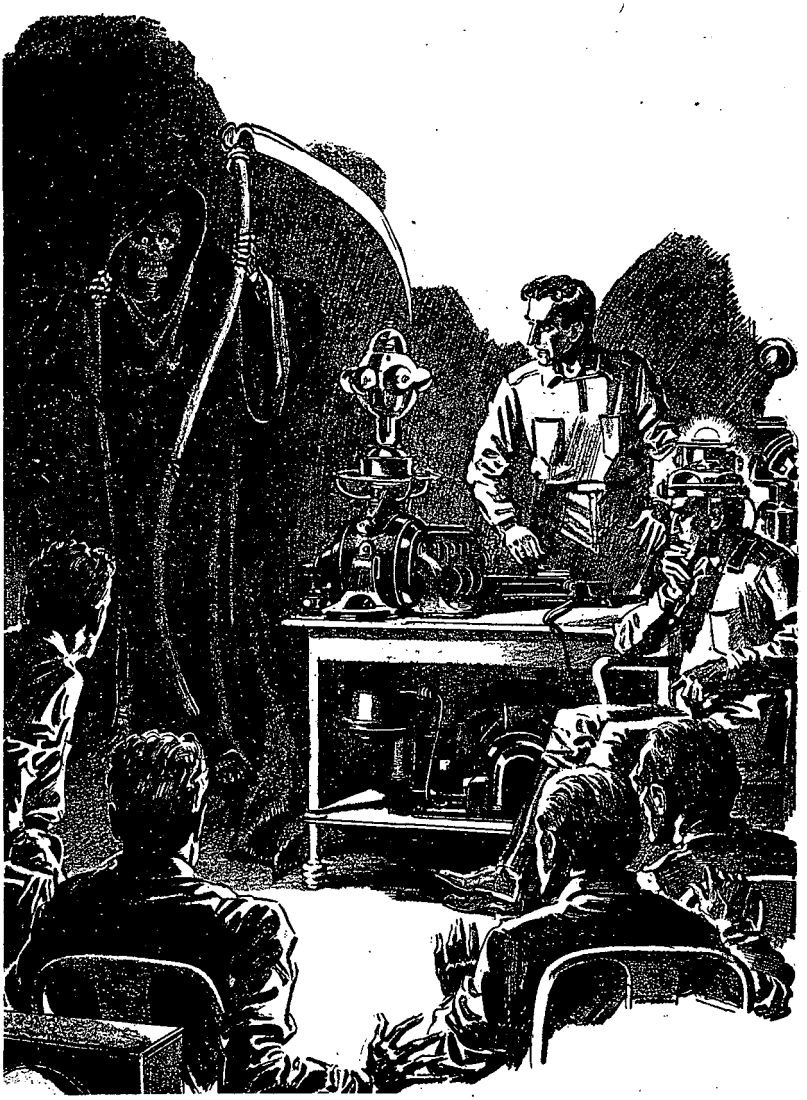
by JOHN W. CAMPBELL, JR.



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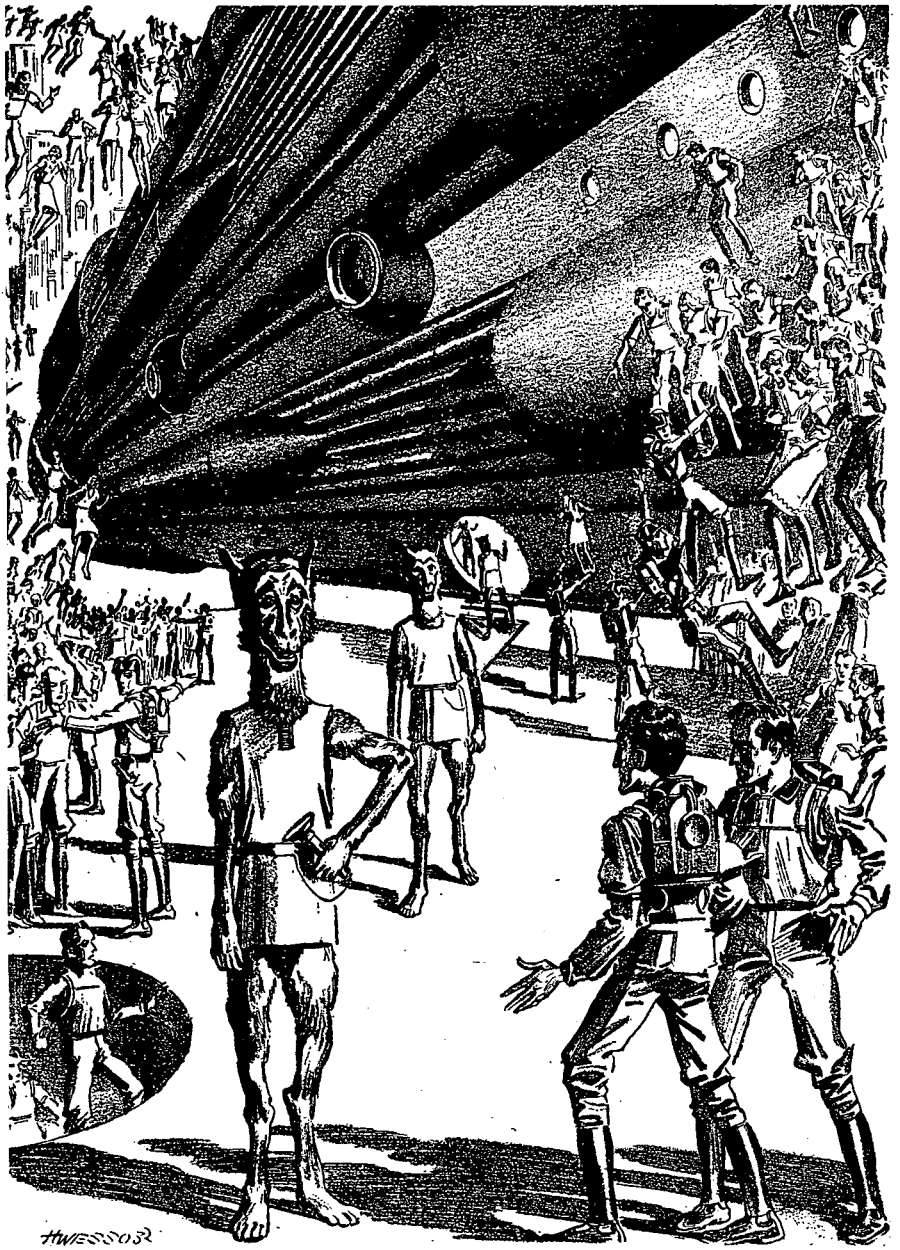

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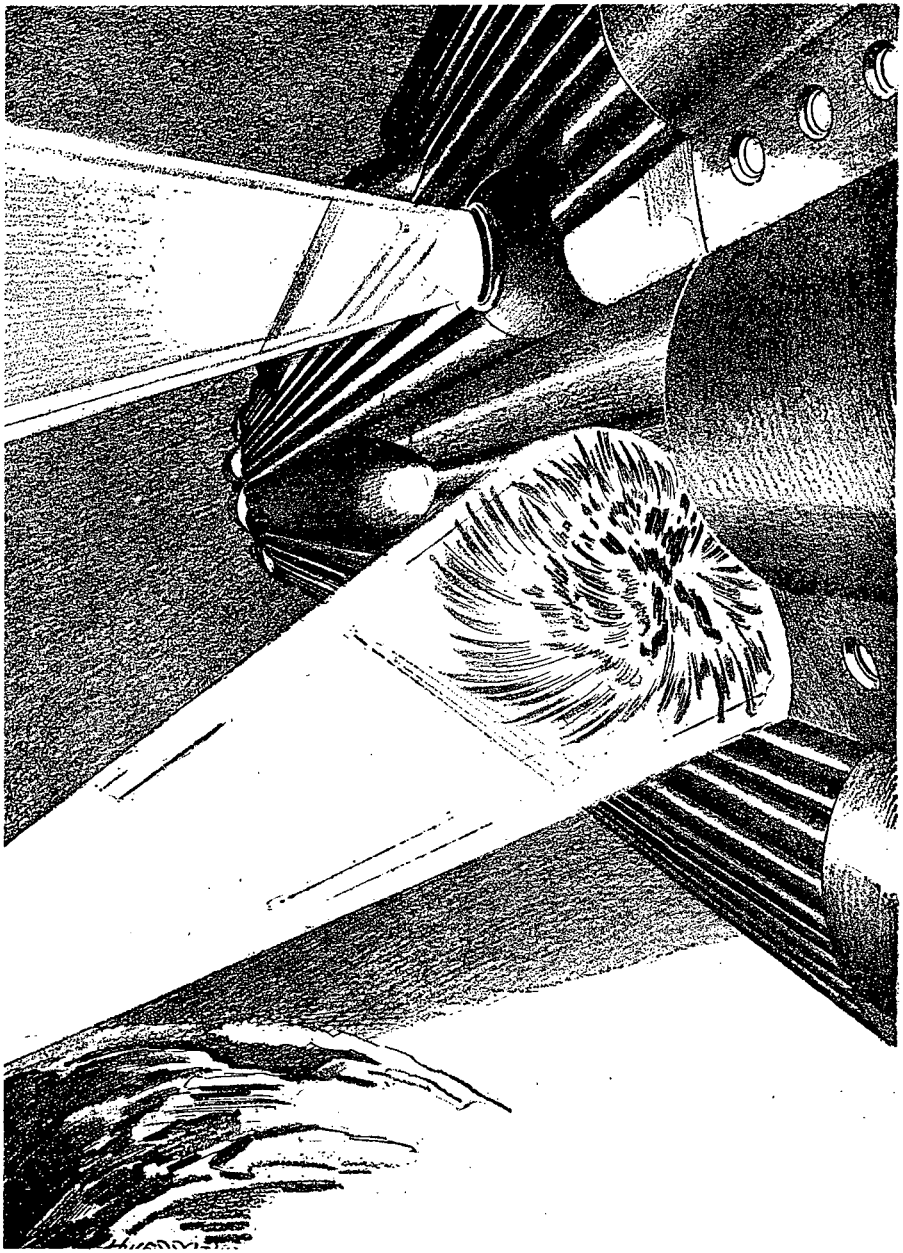

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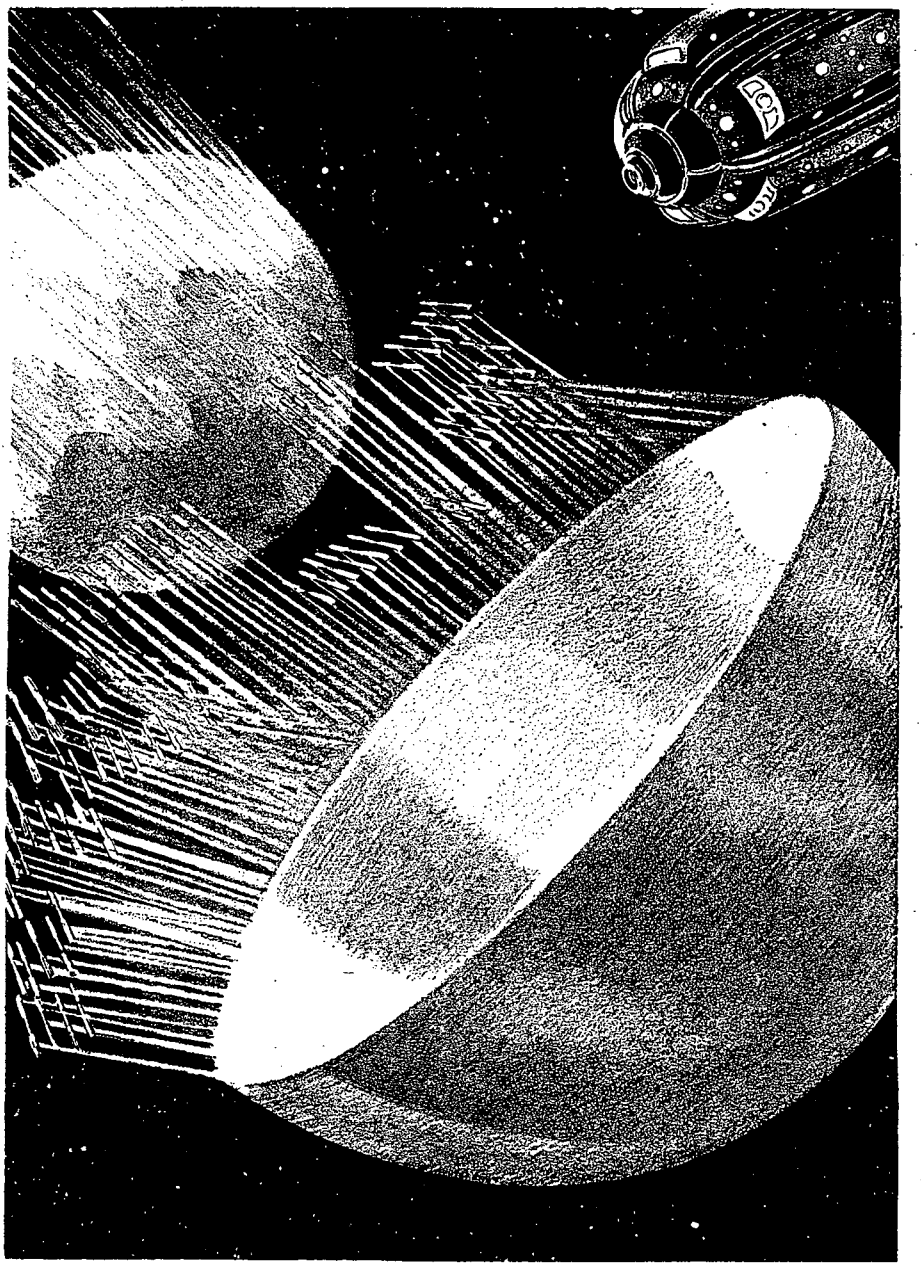

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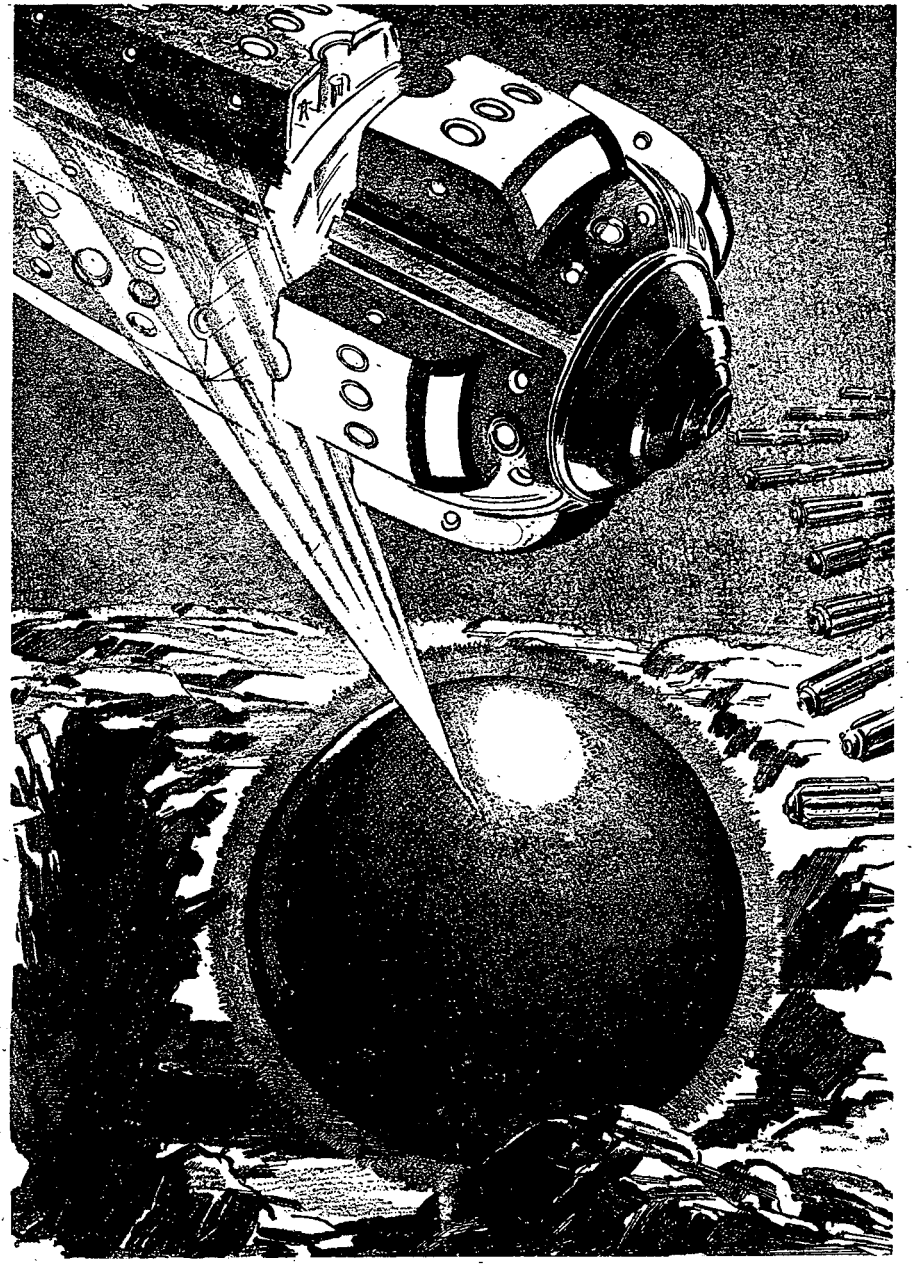

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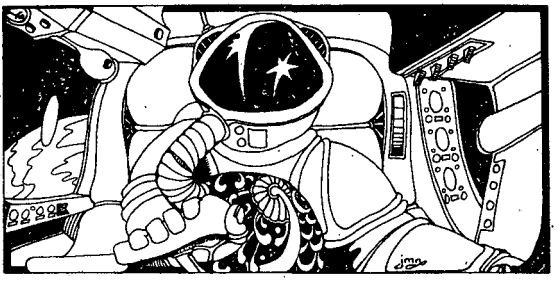
ALEXEI & CORY PANSHIN

SF in Dimension



The Search For Renewal

THERE REMAINS only a little more to be said in order to bring this history of the development of modern speculative fantasy that we have been pursuing up to the present moment. Once again, during these past few years, sf has fallen into imbalance and stagnation.

What are the reasons? Once again, it might be possible to point in blame to phenomena in the wide world outside. The cause may be the same cause that has affected the vitality of rock music. Perhaps the disastrous events of 1968—the assassinations and social upheaval and suppression of protest—took the heart out of sf creativity. Perhaps sun spots are responsible. (We offer this possibility in semi-seriousness. Each of sf's most dismal periods since 1926 has roughly coincided with a period of maximum sun spot activity. The last five periods of maximum activity have been 1926-27, 1937-38, 1947, 1957-58, and 1968-69. This leads us to wonder what the state of speculative fantasy will be c. 1979.)

But these reasons, as the reasons that we have given for all the earlier periods in which sf lost its way, may ultimately be beside the point. As we have seen, the development of modern sf has clearly been a progression. No period of confusion has been like any previous period of confusion. And no period of advance has been like any previous period of advance.

In fact, while the development of modern sf has been a progression, it has not been a smooth progression. It has been a series of evolutionary leaps. In each case, an advance has been adopted. It has seemed like an ultimate answer. It has stimulated a burst of creativity. But each advance has had its own inherent limitations. When the creative momentum of an advance has been exhausted, its limitations have suddenly become overwhelmingly apparent. Then sf has waffled and wandered, repeating itself helplessly, until it hit upon the next advance, the solution to the problems of the last advance. The outside phenomena which we have associated with sf's periods of

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confusion—whether the Bomb, or politics, or sun spots—may or may not actually be connected, and the extent of their responsibility most probably has been merely to stimulate the revelation of existing limitation.

Since 1968, sf has been wandering again, vainly seeking a solution to a problem of which it is only half-conscious. Once again, sf has fallen into imbalance, a sharp split into markedly didactic and aesthetic components. If past experience is any reasonable guide, we can expect that sf will be locating its next source of advance by the time this column is published or shortly thereafter. It may already have done so—with publishing lag or our own involvement in events interfering with our recognition of the fact. However, if in the course of this long inquiry into the development of modern sf that we have been engaged in during the past year we have learned anything, we may be able to locate the ultimate source of the present confusion and describe the necessary shape of its solution.

If we are right, the grounds of the present moment of confusion are to be found existing in potential in the Fifties and even earlier. We have characterized the Fifties as concentrating on the final pervasive establishment of plausibility and on the craftsmanly finishing of all those supporting symbols that were invented at the beginning of the Forties. This was an immediately fruitful advance. But ultimately it led to the great crisis of the late Fifties and early Sixties.

The concentration on plausibility and sense had two results. The more obvious and pressing was the need to rediscover mystery. As we have seen, mystery, was rediscovered in the early Sixties. The mystery inherent in traditional fantasy symbols was conjoined with the familiar plausibilities of well-worn modern sf devices.

This advance unloosed a creative eruption, but when the eruption was over, a problem remained, the other result of the Fifties concentration. In its singleminded concern with the development of supporting symbols invented ten and fifteen years earlier, the Fifties had seemingly squeezed the last bit of juice out of the familiar devices and situations of modern sf. This was disguised for a time by the high dazzle of mystery. Attention was distracted. But when mystery had been firmly re-established, and was a commonplace, a working element like other working elements and not a novelty, the problem of the staleness of science fiction conventions and devices remained. Replacement or renewal of these symbols was required. However, the problem was not just this simple.

To a writer like Larry Niven, who began publishing his stories in late 1964, somewhat later than the other prominent new writers of the Sixties, and who has followed his own highly individual path, the problem *was* this simple and the solution was a replacement of symbols, a return to the solutions of the early Forties. Just as a George O. Smith might have done in 1942, Niven has kept himself informed of current scientific research and theories and busied himself with the invention of new science-beyond-science. However, that this didactic solution is not completely satisfactory may be seen from the fact that Niven's very first story, "The Coldest Place" (*If*, December 1964), was outdated by new scientific observation between the

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time that it was bought and the time that it was published.

Niven is not an unambitious writer, but his ambition has led him to writing a long series of stories set against a consistent background, not to writing well—although, like so many of us, he has considerably improved his style since he first began to write. To writers who have followed Samuel R. Delany in hungering for literary successes undreamed of by George O. Smith or Larry Niven, the problem of the renewal of modern sf has had an additional dimension.

Throughout its modern history, speculative fantasy has been either peripheral literature, a talking dog act—as it was in the hands of Wells, and Huxley, and Orwell—or it has been an illegitimate literature, developing where it could, as it could. Most often, it has been illegitimate. Its chief publishing vehicles have been dubious—pulp magazines and paperback books. Its first audience has been adolescents, and the prime duty of modern sf to the readers who have allowed it to exist by paying for it has been to hold their interest. Science fiction has promised thrills, wonders and astonishment, and done its best to deliver them. The vast bulk of science fiction has been action adventure—Captain Future, *Planet Stories*, and Ace Double Books.

In between, and alongside, sf has added intellection and as good writing as it could manage. At its best, some small amount of science fiction has been well-written. At its best, a much larger amount of science fiction has been intelligent. But there has always been a tension between the need to thrill and astound and the intellectual demands of the invention of the new universes of sf. The emotional appeals of science fiction are adolescent appeals. The intellectual appeals have often, though not always, been more mature, but this has simply meant that the audience for science fiction has been engineers and bright fifteen-year-olds. Those of its audience who have not been engineers and who have matured emotionally have left sf behind them as they have grown up—unaware in most cases that sf has aided them in growing up.

In the mid- and late Sixties, then, a large number of the writers of sf became aware that speculative fantasy could be better written than it was, and that its chief audience was adolescents. To some of them, these two points seemed directly connected. In consequence, they put another coat of polish on the high shine of the intellectual surface of sf, and attempted another didactic solution. Brian Aldiss attempted to mate sf to the French anti-novel and produced *Report on Probability A* (*New Worlds*, February 1967). And then again, Aldiss adapted the James Joyce of *Finnegans Wake* to speculative fantasy in a series of stories first published in *New Worlds* and then collected as the novel *Barefoot in the Head* (1970). Philip José Farmer tried the same solution in a Hugo-winning novella, "Riders of the Purple Wage", published in an original anthology edited by Harlan Ellison, *Dangerous Visions* (1967). And John Brunner even turned to the model of John Dos Passos in his Hugo-winning novel, *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968). But none of these experiments has seemed to satisfy the need for renewal in sf. They have been intellectual impositions, none completely successful, none leading to the necessary advance demanded.

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In *Dangerous Visions*, a collection of 33 original stories, and in *Again, Dangerous Visions* (1972), a collection of 46 further stories, Harlan Ellison has drawn the same conclusion as Aldiss and Brunner, but put the emphasis elsewhere. He has entertained literary experimentation in the stories he has chosen to publish, as in the Farmer story, but his chief interest has been in material that is clearly non-adolescent, fiction too "dangerous" to be printed elsewhere. Again, an intellectual solution to the current problems of speculative fantasy. The result has been blasphemy, dirty words, kinky sex, and other sensationalisms. If Niven could be said to be a return to the Forties, *Dangerous Visions* and its successor are a return to the early Fifties when "The Lovers" and "A Case of Conscience" were the taboo-breakers. And again, Ellison's answer has been no answer. The juvenilities of speculative fantasy are emotional, not intellectual, and Ellison's "dangerous visons" are an adolescent's notion of maturity.

The same might be said of Norman Spinrad's *Bug Jack Barron*. This was a "responsible" near-future satire on the power of talk show hosts, with a strong enough infusion of sensationalism and raw language to attract the attention of British authorities and jeopardize the continued existence of *New Worlds*, where it was serialized in 1967 and 1968.

New Worlds, under the editorship of a new young editor, Michael Moorcock, was the vortex of all the attempted didactic alternatives in speculative fantasy in the latter half of the Sixties. *New Worlds* was loud, exciting at times, often repulsive, and ultimately misguided. *New Worlds* believed that the devices of science fiction were stale. And that was true and well-perceived. It believed that sf could be better written. Again, true. And it believed that sf was unnecessarily juvenile. Granted once more. But the conclusion that it reached was that sf was juvenile and badly-written because of its devices. Rocket ships and robots were inherently juvenile. And the seeming successes of Zelazny and Delany were transparent.

As Moorcock said in 1968, "The current spate, in the U.S. magazines, of fancy, emotive writing used to give a semblance of life to stale ideas carried on obsolete story structures, is to my mind a dead-end—the last spasm of the corpse." These opinions, by the way, did not prevent Moorcock from printing fiction by both Zelazny and Delany.

The answer that *New Worlds* offered, beginning in 1965, was to discard all the devices that science fiction has spent forty years in inventing. Radical surgery, cutting away the immature.

Charles Platt, a sub-editor of *New Worlds*, explains: "Escapist fiction is a tired old label applied too often to science fiction. In a way it is appropriate, but too vague—it can be argued that reading of *any* kind of fiction is an escapist occupation. It's better to avoid categories altogether, but for the sake of clarity I will try to divide fiction not into escapist and non-escapist, but into that which has strong connections with reality, and that which creates its own little world, where actions and events, as in a dream, need not follow the rules of everyday life. . . . These categories are not absolute. Some fiction, particularly that of J.G. Ballard, isn't so easily

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classified. But the categories do represent the divergence of methods and interests between the writers of traditional sf, who are interested in providing simple entertainment, and the New Wave writers, who are interested in providing something more. . . .

"The fiction that followed was closer to 'real' fiction than to 'dream', because its exponents found real life and real thoughts much more exciting source material than galactic warfare. . . . The principal qualities of the writing were that it was literate, fresh, energetic, demanded intelligent reader-participation rather than passive involvement, and described experiences and outlooks directly related to those of the writers and the readers. That is the essence of New Wave, as understood by its exponents."

This "New Wave", which its propagandists seemed to suggest was a tidal wave that would inevitably sweep away all the obsolete reactionary corpus of previous modern sf, was stylistically experimental, obscure, and surrealistic. *New Worlds* was willing to publish work like Aldiss's and Spinrad's that did not absolutely reject all science fiction convention, but its more standard product was contemporary in setting, realistic and personal. As Platt says, it "demanded intelligent reader-participation rather than passive involvement." New Wave fiction was a puzzle to be solved, another ultimate in didactic fiction.

In 1968, an American book reviewer and anthologist, Judith Merril, published a collection of stories from *New Worlds* from the period 1965-1968 under the title *England Swings SF*. Some of the titles of the stories she included indicate the nature and flavor of the *New Worlds* New Wave as much as the titles of earlier science fiction accurately described its nature: "The Baked Bean Factory", "Report on a Supermarket", "The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach", and a J.G. Ballard story, "The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race", originally published in another British magazine, *Ambit*.

In 1965, the British solution to the problems of modern sf went largely unnoticed. In 1968, when the creative force of the advance of the Sixties was spent and writers and readers were wondering why, the claims of *New Worlds* attracted wide attention. They were the only answer in sight and they were vigorously presented. But ultimately they were not convincing. To most writers and readers, it did not seem that the answer to the problems of sf was to reject the preceding forty years out of hand. More, the actual fiction presented in *New Worlds* was generally considered unappealing and puzzling. To Michael Moorcock or Charles Platt, this may have been additional evidence of the juvenility of the science fiction audience, but throughout the latter part of the Sixties the circulation of *New Worlds* continued to fall. *New Worlds* was saved for a time by a British Art Council grant, then reincarnated as a paperback series.

The greatest impact that *New Worlds* had was the phrase "the New Wave". It was adopted by Harlan Ellison to describe his anthology *Dangerous Visions*. And soon it began to be applied to any sort of speculative fantasy that did not look like the sf of the Fifties or earlier. Delany and Zelazny

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were even described as New Wave Writers. Ultimately, the phrase lost all usefulness and is now only rarely invoked. Some didactic and realistic fiction with only a modicum of Gernsback-Campbell-Heinlein has continued to be published, as in the second *Dangerous Visions* anthology, the series of *Orbit* anthologies edited by Damon Knight, and the *Clarion* anthologies of work by beginning writers edited by Robin Scott Wilson, but the result has not been an advance. No one, except a few of the principals involved, is enthusiastic about the results. It seems clear now that in a very short time this work will look as tired, abortive and dated as the fiction offered as a hope and promise in *England Swings SF*.

The problem, it is becoming clear, is not an objective problem and is not open to an objective solution. The problem is a subjective problem. It is not the sense of the symbols of science fiction that is in question. It is the meanings these symbols are used to produce, the emotional action at the heart of a speculative fantasy story. The solution to the staleness and juvenility of sf, then, is not to reject all the modern progress of speculative fantasy since the time of Gernsback. The solution of the problem of the renewal of speculative fantasy is to turn the devices, conventions and symbols of modern sf to truly adult ends.

But this is not an intellectual problem amenable to intellectual solution. It can't be solved by writing about dangerous visions. It can't be solved by adapting mimetic writing styles to sf. And it can't be solved by rejecting the galactic in favor of "real life" and "real thoughts."

The need in speculative fantasy now is for an adult rather than a juvenile interior emotional action. That is the first need. The second need is to then find a new balance between the aesthetic and didactic, but that is a comparatively trivial problem.

The major problem has not been recognized intellectually because speculative fantasy in general has not been intellectually understood. This is not surprising. Fiction exists to present emotional actions that cannot be otherwise presented. It they could be uttered as effectively in other than story form, they would be. And because our culture has been rational and intellectual to the point of major fault, oblivious to its unconscious and its emotions, it has not even recognized this much of the situation. Necessarily, then, sf writers have had to grope toward their solution of the present moment of confusion. In a very real sense, sf writers are taking on the burden of the society as a whole. The solution that they are groping for is one that is generally needed, and if and when sf finds its solution, it will have general application.

In any person's life, there are critical moments of impasse. Whatever he has been and whatever he has been capable of, he is now and again faced by a problem that simply cannot be solved in terms of his present self. No solution that has ever worked for him before is sufficient to solve this problem. No matter how hard he wrestles, no matter what seeming victories he achieves, the problem continues to be a problem.

A late adolescent is faced with the problem of finding a basis for being an adult. He *must* become an adult. But nothing he has ever done as a child is a sufficient adult basis for being. The

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problem can only be solved by a solution beyond the range of a child. So high school graduates find full-time jobs, or they marry, or they enter the Army, or they travel away to college. A further crisis comes in the mid-twenties at the end of apprenticeship. Again, growth is called for. The young worker may change jobs, or he may become a journeyman. The wife becomes a mother. The soldier becomes a sergeant. The college student graduates. If after the first crisis people are known by their selection of adult activity—"He's studying to be an accountant; she's a newly-wed"—after the second, people become known by their occupations.

These crises, these critical moments of impasse, continue to occur all throughout a lifetime. They can only be solved by growth, by rebirth as a larger person. Martin Luther solved the crisis that comes in the early thirties by nailing his ninety-five theses to the church door in Wittenberg. These were a summary of the problems that his old identification with the Catholic Church could not solve. Robert Heinlein solved the same age crisis by becoming an sf writer.

It is these critical moments of impasse that are symbolized in fiction. Typically, a problem is stated that a character cannot solve within his former terms. In order to solve the problem, the character must grow. Speculative fantasy presents a symbolization of the interior of the experience—that which occurs within our own heads when we face our limitations and then suddenly redefine ourselves—in terms of confrontations with powers, beings and places that are not objectively known to exist. That is, transcendent symbols.

In terms of mimetic fiction, a failed confrontation, which may be either a refusal or an inability to grow, might be symbolized by demotion, by collapse into drunkenness, by an automobile accident, by death. In contrast, in a speculative fantasy, the hero might be swallowed by a giant alien frog. Or, as in Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations", a failed confrontation might be a story in which a girl is devoured by the unknown but inviolable laws of the universe. Or, as in Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream", failure might be symbolized by being tortured forever and ever by a giant hostile computer.

Here is an example of a failed confrontation—not a devouring but an example of a lesser failure where the character is wounded and flees from transcendence—from Heinlein's "By His Bootstraps":

"He became possessed of an overpowering desire to know more about these strange creatures, the 'High Ones,' who had come and ruled the human race and built this Palace and this Gate, and gone away again—and in whose backwash he had been flung out of his setting some thirty millennia. To the human race they were no more than a sacred myth, a contradictory mass of tradition. No picture of them remained, no trace of their writing, nothing of their works save the High Palace of Norkaal and the Gate. And a sense of irreparable loss in the hearts of the race they had ruled, a loss expressed by their own term for themselves—the Forsaken Ones.

"With controls and speculum he hunted back through time, seeking the Builders. It was slow work, as he had

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found before. A passing shadow, a tedious retracing—and failure.

"Once he was sure that he had seen such a shadow in the speculum. He set the controls back far enough to be sure that he had repassed it, armed himself with food and drink and waited.

"He waited three weeks.

"The shadow might have passed during the hours he was forced to take out for sleep. But he felt sure that he was in the right period; he kept up the vigil.

"He saw it.

"It was moving toward the Gate.

"When he pulled himself together he was halfway down the passageway leading away from the Hall. He realized that he had been screaming. He still had an attack of the shakes.

"Somewhat later he forced himself to return to the Hall, and, with eyes averted, enter the control booth and return the spheres to zero. He backed out hastily and left the Hall for his apartment. He did not touch the controls nor enter the Hall for more than two years.

"It had not been fear of physical menace that had shaken his reason, nor the appearance of the creature—he could recall nothing of *how* it looked. It had been a feeling of sadness infinitely compounded which had flooded through him at the instant, a sense of tragedy, of grief insupportable and unescapable, of infinite weariness. He had been flicked with emotions many times too strong for his spiritual fiber and which he was no more fitted to experience than an oyster is to play a violin.

"He felt that he had learned all about the High Ones a man could learn and still endure. He was no longer curious. The shadow of that vicarious emotion ruined his sleep, brought him sweating out of dreams."

However, in sf much more often than in most contemporary mimetic fiction, heroes do rise to challenges and rebirth is successful. The hero must meet transcendence and, instead of being freaked or devoured, be reborn from the encounter. Here is an explicit example, not altogether unlike the Heinlein, from Ursula LeGuin's recent novel, *A Wizard of Earthsea:*

"At first it was shapeless, but as it drew nearer it took on the look of a man. An old man it seemed, grey and grim, coming towards Ged; but even as Ged saw his father the smith in that figure, he saw that it was not an old man but a young one. It was Jasper: Jasper's insolent handsome young face, and silver-clasped grey cloak, and stiff stride. Hateful was the look he fixed on Ged across the dark intervening air. Ged did not stop, but slowed his pace, and as he went forward he raised his staff up a little higher. It brightened, and in its light the look of Jasper fell from the figure that approached, and it became Pechvarry. But Pechvarry's face was all bloated and pallid like the face of a drowned man, and he reached out his hand strangely as if beckoning. Still Ged did not stop, but went forward, thought there were only a few yards left between them now. Then the thing that faced him changed utterly, spreading out to either side as if it opened enormous thin wings, and it writhed, and swelled, and shrank again. Ged saw in it for an instant Skiorh's white face, and then a pair of clouded, staring eyes, and then suddenly a fearful face he did not know, man or monster, with writhing lips and eyes

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that were like pits going back into black emptiness.

"At that Ged lifted up the staff high, and the radiance of it brightened intolerably, burning with so white and great a light that it compelled and harrowed even that ancient darkness. In that light all form of man sloughed off the thing that came towards Ged. It drew together and shrank and blackened, crawling on four short taloned legs upon the sand. But still it came forward, lifting up to him a blind unformed snout without lips or ears or eyes. As they came right together it became utterly black in the white mage-radiance that burned about it, and it heaved itself upright. In silence, man and shadow met face to face, and stopped.

"Aloud and clearly, breaking that old silence, Ged spoke the shadow's name, and in the same moment the shadow spoke without lips or tongue, saying the same word: 'Ged.' And the two voices were one voice.

"Ged reached out his hands, dropping his staff, and took hold of his shadow, of the black self that reached out to him. Light and darkness met, and joined, and were one."

If Ged had freaked and run, like Heinlein's character, he might well have been killed. At the least, like Heinlein's character, he would have been wounded, robbed of sleep and rest, turned old before his time. As it is, he is reborn as a mature man, a master wizard.

The problem for us today in our society is that we do not know how to solve our adult impasses. We have no satisfactory image of what we can become, so we flounder. Like Heinlein's character, we cast about wildly for our solutions, and like Heinlein's character we are wounded, robbed of sleep and rest, turned old before our time. Middle-aged people, instead of growing, divorce, turn to drink and drugs, disintegrate.

Sf has the same problem. It can present answers to the impasses of childhood, the late-adolescent crisis, even the crisis of the mid-twenties. These answers are exterior answers, answers in terms of behavior. The differences between a journeyman and an apprentice, between a sergeant and a private, between a wife and a bride, are a matter of gross skill. And this difference can be successfully symbolized in sf. A bright young hero can jury-rig a frammis and whip the alien invaders. He can conquer the universe. And the young can find these fascinating problems and satisfying solutions.

However, the difference between a journeyman and a master is not a matter of gross skill. It is a matter of dedication. To the journeyman, his work is an end in itself. To a master, his work is a means in terms of which he expresses a higher involvement. But as much as anyone else today, sf writers are unsure of higher dedications. They can express the problem, but they have no finished solutions. So most often, when sf does symbolize an adult impasse, it must present failure. Transcendence is met, but to disastrous effect.

This is exactly what we find in Heinlein's "By His Bootstraps". His character is caught in a maze of time in which he meets himself again and again, acting out what he has already seen himself act out, helpless to alter his behavior, vainly repeating himself, trapped in his own futility. This is a

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classic expression of a personal impasse. And it is a trap that the character has laid for himself. His older self is responsible for setting the time trap for his younger self. He is the agent of his own futility. The best that the character can do is achieve worldly power. Far, far in the future, he rules a society of morons. But he finds no satisfaction in this. Gross power is a solution only for the young.

As Heinlein says: "But even he lost interest in playing a game that he always won . . . . His subjects co-operated with his wishes, but in a bemused fashion, like a dog performing a trick, not because he understands it, but because his master and godhead desires it. He soon tired of it. But the mystery of the High Ones, and especially the mystery of their Time Gate, still remained to occupy his mind."

The search for transcendence, the hope of rebirth from an encounter with transcendence, is his one way out of his impasse. But when he does encounter transcendence, the experience must be a failure. He can conceive of no higher dedication. He has no terms of rebirth. So he must turn from transcendence and run—and remain trapped in his own character, to run round and round and round the maze, without hope.

The writers of sf have not yet found the key to the maze, but they are earnestly seeking it. They are coming closer and closer, presenting half-solutions, partial-solutions, personal solutions. In the course of the search, the new aesthetic speculative fantasy of the late Sixties and early Seventies has turned deeply introspective.

The result has been books like Bruce McAllister's *Humanity Prime*, Ted White's *By Furies Possessed*, Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Joanna Russ's *And Chaos Died*, R. A. Lafferty's *Fourth Mansions*, and Robert Silverberg's *A Time of Changes*. These are but examples. None of them has been completely satisfactory. They have been more the promise of maturity than the fulfillment.

Maturity is coming—a speculative fantasy that can sustain and guide not only the young, but adults as well. The terms of the solution, we can see now, will be in terms of personal evolution, in terms of union, in terms of co-operation, in terms of creativity.

These will be the terms not only in which the encounters with transcendence of speculative fantasy are couched, these will be the terms in which our society will remake itself. As sf is seeking a vital advance, so are we all. This is the way out of the maze in which we are trapped—we as individuals, our society, our world. And speculative fantasy may be the first to get the terms exactly right—to say what must be said as it must be said. If it happens, as we think it will, the speculative fantasy of the next years will be a great literature.

ALEXEI PANSHIN: This column is now three years old. It began as an ordering process, an attempt to understand sf as it had not been previously understood. I said at the beginning: "I have been reading science fiction for twenty years, writing it for ten, and criticizing it for six. My opinions on the subject have been changing all the while, and you can assume that they will continue to change, possibly from one column to the next." This prediction was more than borne out by actual events. For al-

(Cont. on page 129)

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fantasy books

Reviewed by Fritz Leiber

BEWARE OF THE CAT, Stories of Feline Fantasy and Horror, ed. by Michel Parry, Taplinger Pub. Co., 1973, $6.50, 192 pages.

Cat stories are my meat and here is a toothsome, largely gruesome, multiple morsel of them, necessarily emphasizing man's dread of the cat rather than his empathy with it, though the latter mood is not always lacking.

The worst cat-villains of these tales are literal man-eaters: the incredible bogey Grimallykin in the scrap of story by Gulielmus Baldwin first published in 1551 in a collection also called *Beware of the Cat;* the cat hordes in Byron Liggett's "The Cat Man," a grisly study of a population explosion on a South Sea atoll; and the vampire cat in a succinct Japanese legend with that title.

However, "The Cats of Ulthar" are wholly approved by their author H. P. Lovecraft (I concur!) in their judicial devouring of two abominable humans. While the furious feline in Barry Pain's "The Grey Cat" is man-killer (and were-cat too) rather than man-eater.

In Le Fanu's "The White Cat of Drumgunniol" puss is portrayed as banshee in a period piece of perfect shivery dread, such as one expects and generally gets from this gifted Irish author.

"Eyes of the Panther" is a powerful study of fear by the American master, Ambrose Bierce, told in his customary solemn, sardonic fashion and bristling with baroque devices such as this chapter heading: "A Room May be Too Narrow for Three, Though One is Outside."

The best-known tales here are those sophisticated studies of cat cleverness and conceit: "The King of the Cats" by Stephen Vincent Benet and "Tobermory" by Saki.

"Fluffy" is a charming bit of same from off the top of the head of Ted Sturgeon.

"The Black Cat" and "The Child Watcher" are amateurish trifles, the first Condescending Victorian, the second Ghastly Modern.

This leaves us "Cat and Mouse" and "Ancient Sorceries." Of these, the

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former is a short by the remarkable Ramsey Campbell, who in his teens was writing Lovecraft-Mythos tales in a well-realized British setting and also picking rather amazingly adult problems to enmesh his characters. The tale is very strongly motivated and full of vivid images—I give him those too—but it is marred by a kind of rush-and over-writing peculiarly modern. On the first page we are plunged into a mad realm where real and unreal merge, while almost every sentence reeks of cat—"the house crouched," "impression of stealth," "the quiet in the garden seemed poised to leap," "the air smelt slightly dank, like fur," etc.—to my mind clearly much too much of an expert writing technique.

Here Algernon Blackwood's "Ancient Sorceries" has the distinct advantage of being told in the far less headstrong Edwardian fashion. The distinction between the real and the possibly unreal is always maintained, although that distinction is steadily changing, and is reinforced by a double frame: the story is being told to the psychic detective John Silence and there is also a second listener, the one who is recording the story—Dr Silence's nameless but thoughtful Dr. Watson.

There are what I consider such key distinction-sentences as "It may have been all perfectly natural, he knew, yet . . ." and "Of course it was nonsense, but . . ."—seeming cliches which actually do an excellent job of keeping real and unreal clearly apart. The whole story is developed in a measured and leisurely way, so that when we arrive at ". . . the sweet and fearful fantasy of evil . . ." we do for a moment believe in it.

Measured and leisurely—that means a long story, one more than twice as long as any of the other stories in this anthology . . . and there, alas, is the rub for the modern reader who wants a story to snatch him up and whirl him along. He may lack the patience to put himself in the narrator's place and fully experience all that is happening.

Nonetheless "Ancient Sorceries," a tale of cats and witches, of witches and their familiars, is by far the best in this book.

THE PHOENIX AND THE MIRROR, *or The Enigmatic Speculum,* by Avram Davidson, Ace, 75 cents, 222 pages.

It's been a while since I've talked of esoteric tomes, my dear friends, foes, and distinguished yawners. (Those last are the ones who speed-read book reviews and everything else, braking to a vicious stop at each intersection between book reviews or whatever, long enough to utter a profound "Ho-Hum.")

One thing you all can still be sure of, though. I review only very good books or exceptionally lousy ones—ones I can stamp on without a twinge of my truly timid and tender conscience. Oh, and then there are books by friends and other great writers who never write bad ones, such as Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Ward Moore, or Avram Davidson.

On this trip, Avram has done his most brilliant job of creating another world: that of the Dark Ages in the days when the Sea Huns dominated the Mediterranean and when Naples was graced by the presence of the sinless sorcerer Vergil Magus, a Vergil much transformed by dark imaginings from the somewhat ho-hum Latin poet who wrote the *Aenead* and also the *Georgics,* those all-time glorifications of the bucolic life, and who was the top versifier in the court of Augustus, wisest, most successful, and yet

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somehow most ho-hum of the Caesars.

The Neapolitan Vergil, on the other hand, was a darksome wonder-worker of the first black water, who wrote or at least transmitted *Vergil's Grimoire*, a book as imaginary as himself, as one can read about in L. Sprague de Camp's engrossing article "Books That Never Were" (*F.&.S.F.*, Dec. 1972). Only Sprague spells him Virgil, which is one of the differences between the conventionally scholarly de Camp and Davidson, an anarchistic Orthodox Jew with the courage of his quirks—an admirable status which he shares with Ward Moore, author of *Bring the Jubilee*, surely one of the ten greatest science-fiction novels ever written, and I only wish he'd write many more.

I could go on almost forever about *Jubilee* and its profound and brilliantly novel treatment of the American Civil War, but this trip it's *The Phoenix and the Mirror*, a creative achievement which demonstrates that though pure fantasy be good, even better is fantasy based on stuff that is half history, on darksome local legends, fantasy forever striving toward realism no matter how weird its sources, fantasy fortified by a deep knowledge of the human condition and by the author's determination to drive himself to the heights and depths of a real-unreal world.

No reader can forget, to name but a few scenes, the witch who sleeps in splendid and fish-smelly squalor warmed by her covey of cats on the roof next to Vergil's, the vast maze of tunnels beneath Napels haunted by the manticores who eat men's brains, the sharp-faced red Phoenician who is also the title's fabulous bird purple-red as the eternal dye of Tyre, the strange sect which has faith in a Christ not crucified but eaten by lions, the Captain-lord of the Tartismen who sends a golden bird fighter-guarded by eagles to Cornwall to seek out the tin Vergil needs for his magic mirror, and Vergil's own fantastic Neapolitan laboratory-home in the Street of the Horse-Jewelers.

The book's minor flaw is that while it is supremely exciting so long as novel people and places keep crowding in as Vergil is on the outward surge, it becomes by comparison wan and even a touch wearisome as the author draws together the threads of his plot toward a conclusion. But Avram Davidson is forever excited by journeys, bored by arrivals.

—FRITZ LEIBER

ON SALE NOW IN JUNE THRILLING S.F.

THE STILL SMALL VOICE, by **ROBERT SILVERBERG**, **WET PAINT**, by **BERTRAM CHANDLER**, . . . **AND WHO THE POT?** by **ERIC FRANK RUSSELL**, **VISIONARY**, by **HARLAN ELLISON & J. L. HENSLEY**, **SMALL MIRACLE** by **RANDALL GARRETT**, **VIOLETS ARE BLANU**, by **LESTER DEL REY**, **BROTHER ROBOT** by **HENRY SLESAR**, a great editorial by **ISAAC ASIMOV**, and many more stories.

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Editorial (Cont. from page 4)

of votes for *Analog* would assure a win. But Presidential elections are not conducted by Australian Ballot.

When the votes for *Galaxy* (which placed last) were redistributed according to second choices, the voting looked like this:

Analog 163
F&SF 154
AMAZING 116
FANTASTIC 38
(No Award 44)

Analog is still ahead, and it becomes clear that those who initially voted for *Galaxy* in first place divided their second place votes fairly evenly between *Analog* and *F&SF*; none of them voted for this magazine in second place.

FANTASTIC was then dropped, and its first-place votes redistributed. At this point a number of second-place votes went to both our sister magazine, AMAZING SF, and to *F&SF*, with very few to *Analog*. Here's the way it looks:

Analog 167
F&SF 164
AMAZING 130
(No Award 46)

At this point *Analog's* lead over *F&SF* has dramatically dwindled to only three points, but *Analog* is still marginally ahead. And it is clear that the redistribution of votes has not increased the lead of the front-runner, but has badly hurt it. No majority vote has yet emerged.

At this point the votes to No Award were redistributed, producing very little change:

Analog 173
F&SF 169
AMAZING 133

Still no clear majority, still no "winner" yet, but quite obviously *Analog* is still holding and defending a tenuous lead of four points.

At this point AMAZING is dropped and its second-place votes are distributed. And suddenly a dramatic shift occurs:

F&SF 239
Analog 204
The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction suddenly spurts ahead to take the lead, and since the field has been narrowed to only two contenders, *any* lead produces a majority (more than 50%) of the vote. Ergo, *F&SF* wins, taking its third Hugo in as many years.

Now at this point you are probably scratching your head and muttering, "But *less people* voted for *F&SF*!" And perhaps, "But that doesn't make any sense—how did 46 votes for No Award end up as five more votes for *F&SF*, six more votes for *Analog* and three more votes for AMAZING? What happened to the other 32 votes?"

And this is where the Australian Ballot totally breaks down. To begin with, as we can clearly see, the Australian Ballot is in itself no clear guarantee against ultimate tie-votes. Had the second place votes on those ballots which gave AMAZING the first-place been less lopsidedly in favor of *F&SF*, a tie might easily have occurred.

Second, there is considerable confusion over the way in which Australian Ballots should be counted and what should be done with second-place votes for already-disqualified nominees. (Presumably the other 32 second-place votes on the No Award ballots went to FANTASTIC and *Galaxy*.) In this case, quite obviously, nothing was done with those votes. But in other cases, when a second-place vote has been disqualified already, the officials in charge have simply moved on to the third- or fourth-place votes for nominees still in the running, so that (in this case) all 46 votes would have been redistributed to the remaining contenders.

It is possible that if this had been done, *F&SF* might not have won the Hugo this year.

There is also considerable confusion over the means to assessing the second, third, fourth and fifth places as well. In the past these places have been assigned according to the order in which nominees were dropped from the running. In that case the final order would have been *F&SF*, *Analog*, AMAZING, FANTASTIC and *Galaxy*. However the LACon Committee apparently conducted the entire balloting process all over again to

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establish the second and third place winners. I'm not going to list the figures here, since in outline they parallel the figures from the first ballot, with the exception that *F&SF's* redistributed ballots gave *Galaxy* an edge of twenty points over FANTASTIC, on the balloting for second place (thus bumping FANTASTIC first) and *Analog's* redistributed ballots put *Galaxy* into strong contention for third place against AMAZING (161 to 163 on the first ballot).

Do these figures reflect the intent of the voters? It's hard to tell. Most voters are not sophisticated and probably did not take the elaborate counting procedures of the Australian Ballot into consideration. Whether an increased sophistication would have made any difference is a moot point.

More important is the fact that out of nine Hugo categories, three of the ultimate winners (Novel, Professional Magazine and Fan Writer) were not winners on the first-place balloting. In each case, the balloting went much as I've described above, with second-place votes ultimately deciding the winners.

Has this happened before? I don't know; no other Worldcon Committee has released such detailed balloting figures for comparison. The only other voting with which I am familiar (NyCon3, 1967), although conducted by Australian Ballot (with slightly different interpretations), did not lead to any similar upsets.

Is the Australian Ballot the best choice for the Hugo voting? I'll let you decide that one for yourself.

LOOKING AT THE FIGURES, I'm struck by certain implications. One is that those who considered *Galaxy* the best sf magazine of 1971 did not vote for either this magazine or AMAZING SF as their second-place choices (*Galaxy's* own companion magazine, *If*, was not in contention this year; presumably it did not gather a sufficient number of nominations to make the ballot). On the other hand, those of you who voted for this magazine in first place divided your second-place choices between *F&SF* (the only other surviving publication devoted to fantasy) and AMAZING—a division of loyalties perhaps between interests (fantasy) and outlooks (many consider our two magazines to be Siamese twins). And those of you who voted AMAZING for first place vastly preferred *F&SF* to *Analog* as a second choice.

On the other hand, we must be wary of generalizing preferences on the basis of these figures. Despite a registration at the LACon of well over two thousand, only 527 first-place votes were cast in the Professional Magazine category. (Many convention members may have joined too late to vote, but surely an equal number declined for other reasons to cast a vote in this category.) Statistical samplings (for television rating surveys, for example) are conducted on equally slender proportions of a total audience, but usually only after considerable research into demographics has been done to assure a meaningful representation in the test sampling. Whether the five hundred twenty-seven voters who decided this year's Hugo awards are similarly representative of the total readership of the sf magazine field is anyone's guess. But, for several reasons (not the least of which is the known difference in attitudes towards sf by long-time fans and—in contrast—the more casual readership which accounts for the bulk of most sf sales), I doubt it.

Still, I am indebted to the LACon Committee for releasing these figures, and to *Locus* (winner of the fanzine Hugo) for publishing them. Whatever speculation these figures may give rise to, it will at the very least be better informed.

THE BEST FROM FANTASTIC: Over the past several years readers have asked us why we have not published an anthology of stories from the back files of this magazine, or, better yet, an annual Best Of The Year collection, as is done by several other magazines in the field.

In 1969 I put together two companion volumes, *The Best From Amazing Stories* and *The Best From Fantastic*. The material was taken primarily from the period in the early 1950's when both magazines were

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paying top rates and attracting stories from the best writers in the field, and from a similar period in the early 1960's when, under Cele Goldsmith's superior editorship, the magazines again flowered with good stories. Introductions were written to each volume and also for each individual story.

For various reasons these books did not find a publisher until 1971, when Macfadden-Bartell contracted to publish them. At that time their contents required some rejuggling, as several authors of included stories either refused permission or were impossible to contact. However, the books were turned in, completed, to Macfadden-Bartell in mid-1971.

Unfortunately, Macfadden-Bartell divested itself of its bookpublishing operation before either book went into print. The books were passed along to Manor Books, a company which assumed obligation for Macfadden-Bartell's publishing schedule, and which subsequently followed through—after a delay—with our two books.

The Best from Amazing Stories was published in January, 1973, under circumstances with which I, personally, am less than totally happy. The book's contents are, I think, of a high standard. But my introduction to the volume is missing, the story-introductions are not well set off from the stories themselves, and the overall package is none too pleasing.

This month (April) *The Best from Fantastic* will be published, and, as I write this (in February), I have no idea whether it will be as disappointing a production job as the earlier volume was. I would like to hope not; I would like to be able to recommend the book to all of you, wholeheartedly. I regret that I cannot, in all conscience, say more than this: I believe the basic contents of the book—the stories—to be of a uniformly high level, the cream of what was published in the first decade of this magazine's existence.

Negotiations are under way for a second pair of volumes, but they await reassurance from Manor Books that greater pains will be taken to assure a package and production job commensurate with the quality of the contents. Failing this, we may be forced to look elsewhere. I will keep you posted.

A CHANGE IN COVER DATES: The last issue of FANTASTIC was dated April, and this issue was originally scheduled to carry a June date on its cover. Instead, it is dated July, as many of you will already have noticed.

This change in cover dates was forced upon us by increasing delays in the production and shipping of this magazine.

The cover date, as I've explained before, is basically our *off-sale* date. This is true of all magazines; if you examine the cover date on a weekly newsmagazine, for instance, you'll find it is for the next week after the magazine has gone on sale; for a monthly magazine the date is one month after the month that magazine has gone on sale. In our case, the cover date should be two months after the on-sale date. This is because newsdealers customarily pull off sale all magazines with current cover dates, whether the next issue has come in yet or not—the competition for space on a newsstand is too fierce.

As I write this (mid-February) our February issue has been on sale less than one month—it came out in most parts of the country in mid-January, at least a month late. And our April issue is yet to go on sale; it may not do so for another month yet.

The only answer was to push our cover dates back a month, to reflect more correctly our actual release schedule. Despite the absense of a June issue, there has been no actual delay between last issue and this issue, and those of you who are subscribers will not lose an issue.

CONAN AND RELATED TOPICS: Customarily this magazine sells fewer copies than its sister magazine, AMAZING SF. This, in turn, seems to be a reflection of the fact that fewer readers are interested in fantasy than in science fiction, and this sales difference has been a constant throughout most of the twenty-year history of this magazine, and, indeed, for the thirteen-year career of its

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predecessor, FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, as well. We are, for the most part, resigned to it.

But our August, 1972, issue reversed this position: it sold not only the best of any issue of FANTASTIC which we published in 1972, but better than any issue of AMAZING published last year as well.

Significantly better.

Why? Well, it *was* our "All-Star 20th Anniversary Issue," and that may well have been a major factor. But it was also the first issue of any sf or fantasy magazine to publish a new Conan story since the Conan revival undertaken in the late sixties by Lancer Books and, more recently, by Marvel Comics. And we gave Conan the full treatment, with a new Jeff Jones cover painting and large cover blurbs. Was this the deciding sales factor?

This issue we offer the second new Conan story, and a superlative Conan cover painting by Harry Roland (the artist who illustrated the first Conan story, last August). Once again: the full treatment.

Will this issue sell as well as the August, 1972, issue did? Only time will tell. But it is my conviction that, under Conan's herald, fantasy is enjoying a great popular resurgence today and that it is the function—indeed, the duty—of this magazine to join forces with the times.

By this I do not mean to turn FANTASTIC into a captive vehicle for Conan stories and similar fantasies to the exclusion of everything else. But quite obviously powerful adventure-fantasy has an important place in these pages and we will continue to publish it here.

I mentioned Harry Roland's cover painting. In the letter column this issue, reader Steve Riley makes an unfounded accusation of plagiarism against Roland's earlier work—to which Roland replies, immediately following—and I anticipate a similar response to his cover painting from readers whose acquaintanceship with the artists involved may be equally slight.

Harry Roland is a commercial artist who lives in Baltimore and makes his living designing packages for commercial products, among them a number of familiar brand names which are probably to be found in most homes.

Harry is a friend of such artists as Jeff Jones, Mike Kaluta and Berni Wrightson, and shares to a large extent their interest in what, for want of a better term, I might call the Frazetta School of painting.

Harry paints in his spare time purely for self-amusement and the love of the work. His style is superficially similar to Frank Frazetta's—a fact he readily acknowledges—largely because he admires Frazetta's work.

But his conception is his own. His Conan is his own. And his painting on this issue's cover, while Frazetta-like in many ways, is in no respect a steal, a copy, or a plagiarism.

I consider us fortunate to find in Harry someone who can do work of this nature, and I'm pleased to have him make his cover debut here. You'll be seeing more of him in the months to come, and, as you do, I trust you'll find yourselves appreciating him more and more for his own unique virtues as an artist in this genre.

Finally, last year I announced as upcoming a review of the comic magazine, *Conan*, as realized by Roy Thomas and Barry Smith (and others). This review was forced out of several successive issues by space considerations until it became too dated to publish as written. Several of you have written to ask what had become of it—while others among you breathed a loud sigh of relief at its absence, and the absence of any further reviews of comic magazine/graphic story material.

One of the factors which led to the postponement of the review was Fritz Leiber's return to these pages with his regular *Fantasy Books* column. However, now that the Panshins have brought their column, *SF in Dimension*, to a conclusion with this issue, new space will be open, and I hope to publish an updated survey of the comic magazine *Conan* in a forthcoming issue—hopefully, in conjunction with the third new Conan novella. Stay with us.

—TED WHITE

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Black Sphinx (Cont. from page 29)

moved with haste, shivering as the sun's inimical rays struck it, and squeezed through the great portal in the sphinx's breast. Then it was gone, and the vast stone door boomed shut behind it.

From a distance, Conan and his companions watched the disappearing monster. Then they trudged back to the camp. There the Aquilonians, drawn up in ranks of archers and spearmen and determined to sell their lives dearly, could hardly believe their deliverance.

Some of the baggage had been lost in tent fires. A few men had died from Stygian arrows and many more were wounded, for these light, long-range shafts were designed to cripple rather than to kill. Everywhere, surgeons were cleaning and binding minor wounds.

Soon Conan and Pallantides organized the recovery. A few of the masterless horses and camels, which wandered disconsolately around the camp, were captured and then used to round up more of the Stygians' mounts. In the course of this work, the Aquilonians discovered the Stygians' abandoned baggage train, by which they soon made good their own losses of material.

His powers augmented by the Heart of Ahriman, the White Druid searched the spirit plane with his astral senses. He awoke from his trance to say that Thoth-Amon had fled the destruction of the Black Ring. He was on his way southeast, toward the mysterious black kingdom of Zembabwei.

THE HOST was drawn up, awaiting orders. There had been changes. Most of the horses were now wiry Stygian ponies. Their riders had put away their plate armor as too heavy for such small steeds to bear. They wore light tunics of chain mail instead. There was a newly formed camel corps, whose members looked uneasily upon their angular, irascible mounts.

Conan sat easily on his camel, his legs locked together in front of the hump. He grinned at a remark by Trocero.

"Of course I know how to ride a camel!" he chuckled. "Wasn't I once a chief of the Zuagir nomads of the eastern deserts? If you treat a camel well and know its limitations, 'tis no harder to manage than any other beast."

He stared at the distant, dun-colored horizon, his blue eyes fierce under scowling brows. Beside him, Diviatix smiled up from his mule cart. He had been drinking again, but his voice was steady enough.

"The Lords of Light are still with you, O King!" he said.

Pallantides cantered up, reining in a restive Stygian gray. "We are ready to march, sire."

"Give the order, then," growled Conan.

"Whither away?" asked Trocero.

Conan grinned, white teeth flashing in his bronzed, impassive face. "Southeast, to Zembabwei and the jungle lands—and to the end of the Earth if need be!"

And the trumpets sang.

—L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & LIN CARTER

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... According to You

Letters intended for publication should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of each sheet, and addressed to According To You, *P.O. Box 409, Falls Church, Va., 22046.*

Dear Ted,

I read the editorial in the Feb. FANTASTIC concerning the service by the post office and the horrendous rise in rates for second class publications. I have a little idea of what's happening.

I've been working for the post office for the past few years, and could discuss, with some familiarity, the current service but there's only 130 pages in the magazine and some people would complain if no stories appeared in that issue.

However, I would speak to Roy Schenck who says the rise in second class postage will destroy the magazines. Last night I worked out samples of postage charges for AMAZING STORIES, using a few recent issues. Postage for second class publications is based on the weight of an average copy and the distance they travel.

Then too, the amount of advertising enters into it. They charge one rate for advertising content and another for all other content.

Since I do not know how many copies go to each zone I had to average this. I figured 1,000 copies mailed to each zone, a total of 7,000 subscription copies. [*Unfortunately, that's about seven times the actual number . . .*—TW]

In a recent issue you had just under 6% advertising, your base rate is approximately 11.4 per pound for advertising content, and 4.2¢ per pound for the rest of the magazine. Your average weight per copy is slightly under one quarter pound per copy.

Figuring it out your charges are $74.55, however there is a minimum charge of 1.3¢ per copy plus 3/10 surcharge.

This bring us out to $112.00 and the greedy post office charges the higher rate. So, 7,000 copies mailed all over the country costs $112.00 . . . an average cost of one and six tenths cents per copy. Really now, even when the 100% increase goes into effect, don't you think Sol Cohen can afford slightly over 3¢ per copy to have his magazines delivered?

I've enclosed the sample forms for your entertainment.

I also worked up a sample sheet for *Playboy*, figured again on 7,000 copies, weighing two pounds each and with an advertising content of 80%. Their costs would be just over $1600 for 7,000 copies, an average of 22.9¢ per copy . . . . they can pay this out of the millions they take in on advertising revenue.

The chief complainers have been the big fancy, heavy magazines & newspapers that still want to mail a 15 pound chunk of paper free.

Incidentally, I did not figure in copies mailed in the county of publication. (lines 10

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& 12). These are delivered at 3/10 of a cent regardless of advertising content. In other words AMAZING is delivered in New York City at three for a penny! [*But are our magazines considered to be published in NYC (which is five counties), or at the printer's plant?*—TW]

You question whether a postal strike in '69 was justified. If you'd stayed in the post office another ten years I figure you'd have been on the picket line. Wages weren't good to begin with and how would you like to wait 15 years to get top pay, considerably less than a factory worker earns 90 days after he starts to work?

However, we'll go over that sort of thing at the next convention. You bring a Pepsi and I'll bring a Jack Daniels, we should both be at our best.

HOWARD DEVORE
4705 Weddel St.
Dearborn, Michigan 48125

Howard enclosed with his letter copies of the filled out PS Form 3541, "Computation of Second-Class or Controlled Circulation Postage." Thanks for the figures; they shed some light on the situation. In any case, one advantage in having relatively few subscribers is that we will be less hurt by the postal rate hike than most. This avoids the central question, however, which is this: To what extent should the Postal Service be regarded as a (taxpayer-) subsidized service in the best interests of the nation as a whole—or, conversely, to what extent should the Postal Service be regarded as a self-sufficient, self-supporting organization? If the latter is the goal, many postal rates will have to climb, and to keep climbing as labor costs grow larger over the years. This is not what the founders of the Post Office envisioned, but at that time the printed word was the only medium for the dissemination of information (aside from word-of-mouth). Is it still of value to this country to encourage the ready circulation of printed matter? And, as a corollary to this, should mail be separated into two types, each with its own rate structure—solicited mail and unsolicited ("junk") mail? The following letter offers another suggestion.—TW

Dear Ted;

Thought you might be interested in the enclosed recent reply from Washington State's Senator Jackson. With little more hope of anything further than a "thanks for your concern" answer, I went to some length to explain how it is that the college literary and other small magazines stand to go unheard while lobbyists for Big Publishers fight for postage breaks for mass publications. Among the things I pointed out was the fact that literary awards go most often to selections from limited circulation 'zines, citing O'Henry and Hugo winners as examples, stating that it is the best of American literature that stands to be lost if circulation is further hampered.

The suggestion I made, while admitting it was an uninformed suggestion, was that all publications be afforded book rate postage and that book rate be afforded second class status.

Whether or not my letter really triggered much action is debatable. With this whole state in a general mess—along with the rest of the country—the amount of time Senator Jackson can offer this problem must be very minute. Yet if you can get a reasonable percentage of your readers to point out the situation to their respective congressmen, the Postal Service may be made to listen.

AMOS SALMONSON
2825 S. 211 St., #3
Seattle, Wash., 98188

Amos enclosed a copy of Senator Jackson's letter, which is as follows:

Thank you for your recent letter in which you expressed your concern about second class postage rates and their effect on smaller publications, particularly literary publications.

I want you to know that I appreciate your very thoughtful comments on the effects of second class postage rates. As you may know, under the Postal Service Reorganization Act of 1970, the Postal Rate Commission, appointed by President Nixon, has

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the authority and responsibility for setting postage rates.

I have been very disappointed with the performance of the Postal Service. I feel that it is incumbent upon Congress to take a closer look at the Postal Service in an effort to improve this organization. I have contacted the Senate Post Office and Civil Service Committee, which has jurisdiction over the Postal Service, about this matter. Because many members of that Committee share my concerns, they will soon hold oversight hearings on the complete organization and management of the Postal Service. In this way, perhaps the present situation can be improved.

With regard to your specific concern to expand the library or book rate to include all printed material, I am taking this suggestion up with officials in the U.S. Postal Service. Just as soon as I have a report from them, I will be in touch with you again.

With best regards,
HENRY M. JACKSON
United States Senate
Washington, D.C., 20510

It would appear that the climate on Capitol Hill, when it comes to the Postal Service, is not so different from what it is elsewhere. Thoughtful, sensible suggestions such as Salmonson's, are at least receiving a hearing. If every one of you who has written me a letter or has considered writing a letter to this magazine were to write to his/her congressmen, it might have a tangible effect!
—TW

Dear Ted:

I'm quite surprised that it seems as if I have to be the one to make mention of this matter, but that's the way it seems to be. I'm referring to the story "The Witch of the Mists" in the August 1972 FANTASTIC. I bought the issue while in Kentucky last summer and eagerly devoured it in one day. I found the Conan novella to be abominable and I more or less chuckled to myself in anticipation as I expected to see future letter columns deluged with outraged letters from Conan fans. To date I can recall seeing but one letter which has made reference to the story.

The story itself is, as I said, abominable. Nothing less. How such drivel could be written and *published* is quite beyond me. Both authors are easily capable of good fiction as witness their recent efforts (De Camp's *The Clocks of Iraz* and Carter's *Under the Green Star*.) I don't really understand why the "story" (if I may call it that) was accepted; it contains every possible cliche in the s & s genre, it plods along dreadfully, and it painfully grinds to a halt.

What particularly pains me though are the illustrations. (Being an art major, it is usually the illustrations which first attract me to any publication or to a story. More so, I think, than the non-art oriented reader.) I am also perplexed (if I may reiterate myself) why no one has made mention of the obvious plagiarism of the drawings.

I had never heard of Roland (the illustrator) before and from seeing his work, I can understand why. If he has to copy other artists' work without attempting to come up with his own ideas from the story, then he is not capable of illustrating.

The drawing on page 34 shows an overpowering influence from Frank Frazetta's cover to *Conan the Adventurer*. The illustration on page 42 borrows the idea (slightly adapted) from Frazetta's cover on *Conan the Conqueror* and the picture on page 51 shows influence from Frazetta's cover on the Ace edition of *Tarzan and the Lost Empire*.

To be influenced by a particular artist is extremely common as most people can tell you. (Witness Al Williamson and Alex Raymond. Wallace Wood and Ralph Reese. Jeff Jones and N.C. Wyeth.) But to blatantly copy poses and ideas from another artist (particularly one that has illustrated stories in the very same series!) is a cardinal sin and is comparable, in my eyes, to the plagiarism of a story idea.

(If fictional swiping is frowned upon, why not artistic?)

I'm sorry to be so overly and harshly

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critical about this Ted. I like your magazines very much and regularly buy each issue. I appreciate what you've done with them both fiction-wise and art-wise. But when such an obvious disaster occurs in your pages, I cannot, as a staunch Robert E. Howard fan and lover of illustration—particularly fantasy, merely sit back silently if no one else is going to speak up so that's why I've taken it upon myself to write this letter.

STEVE RILEY
18 Norman Drive
Framingham, Mass. 01701

Harry Roland replies:

Steve Riley's examples of my so-called swipe are pretty far afield. If any reader even cares to compare my illustrations with those that Steve mentions he will see the accusations are unfounded.

Though I do emulate Frazetta (as do countless other artists), I never copy a figure or an idea; only his technique. Steve Riley's pen drips with poison. Not only for me, but for Carter and de Camp. He must be a very unhappy person.

Dear Ted;

I just saw the mention of "my" review of *All In Color For A Dime*, in the Feb. FANTASTIC. I've never reviewed *AICFAD*, but I think I know what review Lester Boutillier is talking about and I enclose a photocopy, which happens to be from *Graphic Story World*, Feb. 1972. As you can see, the reviews are signed at the *bottom*, and the *AICFAD* review appears right underneath a review of mine for another book (Vane Lindesay's *The Inked-In Image: A Survey of Australian Comic Art)*, so this *does* place Richard Kyle's review of *AICFAD* just under my name if you disregard the decorative border separating them.

As long as I'm writing, I'll add a note to keep up the good work. You've returned AMAZING and FANTASTIC to the quality of the days of Cele Goldsmith Lalli's editorship, when it was a pleasure to read. I don't like *every* story you select, but then no magazine is perfect, and as long as you've got an author lineup that includes de Camp, Vance, Brunner, Russell, Davidson, and Effinger, I'm happy. I'm lucky in having local newsstands that are well-stocked with both magazines. In fact, as a result, I buy not one but six copies of each AMAZING and FANTASTIC, one for myself and five for other fans for whom I'm a pick-up agent.

As to your comments on the postal service, I'm still waiting to get books and magazines mailed to me from Europe last October and November! My local Post Office branch has declined to accept a claim for lost mail yet because, as of this date (5 February), there's still a "reasonable" chance that it's "still in the pipeline" clogged by the usual Christmas season mail rush, and will be delivered in due course.

Amos Salmonson's suggestion for an s-f fan fair sounds worth trying. Fans in California have been talking for years about organizing a convention in Yosemite National Park, but nobody's ever gotten around to doing anything about implementing the idea. It's too cold in winter and too crowded with tourists in the summer. Still, somebody, somewhere, will eventually try the idea. As Salmonson says, it's a good *alternative* to the traditional s-f convention, and with the growing size of s-f conventions, more *alternatives* are needed. The official registered attendance of the L.A. Con, the 1972 World S-F Convention, was 2,007 when the registration desk closed on the final day, and everybody knew that there were at least an extra hundred or so people wandering around the halls who'd strolled in from the streets and never bothered to join. Result: the biggest reasonably-priced hotel in Los Angeles (the next largest would've required a jump of about $6 a night in room rates) was crowded beyond the point of comfort for most attendees. More smaller conventions, more alternatives, are needed.

FRED PATTEN
Graphic Story Bookshop
P.O. Box 2053
Culver City, Calif., 90230

Here are the relevant portions of Richard

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Kyle's review:

"All in Color for a Dime" is a good book sandwiched between a very bad one—the opening two chapters and the concluding chapter leave such a bad taste that the remainder of the book seems tainted. . . .

But among some who write about comics there is a belief that the normal journalistic standards of accuracy and style do not apply to a discussion of comic books. Comic books, they seem to say, are subliterate—and the only appropriate way to write of them is sub-literately. Ted White's opening chapter, which attempts to tell the story of the comic book through the creation of 'Superman' and 'Batman' is a blurted melange of opinion, supposition, and gossip, passed off as fact." He also condemns Richard Ellington's chapter on Planet Comics *("lacks even the trashy style of its subject") and Harlan Ellison's chapter on George Carlson ("reads as though it had been dictated late at night by an insomniac tape recorder"—a strange image indeed).*

I'm afraid Kyle's viewpoint—that even the trashiest "comic books" should be treated with all the respect one might accord works of Great Literature—is one to which I cannot subscribe. His own writing is indeed "sub-literate"—"lacks even the trashy style of its subject" does not say what he appears to mean, for instance; it means the reverse—and his characterization of my contribution to the book is simply his own opinion, nothing more. (Readers of this magazine can form their own opinions about my writing; it hasn't changed greatly since I wrote the piece in question.)

In any case, Fred, thanks for the copy of the review, and my apologies for allowing it to be attributed to you.—TW

Dear Ted,

I have closely followed the recent controversy over *Star Trek* in FANTASTIC STORIES; and I noticed you offered to present to anyone in television who might be interested new ideas for five new television science fiction series. I have heard that *Star Trek* might get back on the air; so, if people from that show get in contact with you, please pass along these ideas of mine:

1. I have noticed that many *Star Trek* episodes take place in Earth's Twentieth Century. If they'd like to expand this theme, they could do a story wherein the Ursa Major Constellation comes to life as a huge "space bear", and, through cosmic power, whisks the Enterprise into the Eighteenth Century. There they meet Daniel Boone, and, equipping him with a cosmic-powered knife, help him battle the Great Bear.

2. A story wherein the Enterprise battles God—and *wins!* That way, Captain Kirk could be, literally, the ultimate moral force in the Universe, as he is figuratively now.

So, Ted, send these ideas up the flagpole and, if anyone salutes, let me know.

DAN H. EILER
901 Silver Meadows Blvd.
Apt. #104
Kent, Ohio 44240

Dear Ted:

I'm writing about a point brught up by Margret Ticklebridges in the December FANTASTIC. In item #9 of her list she suggests that the words "science fiction" are embarrassing to some people. You seem to think that she is wrong. I don't know if omitting "sf" from the cover would boost your circulation (after all, look at *Analog's* circulation with "science fiction" printed boldly on the cover), but Margret does have a point.

I speak from personal experience, specifically from my father. He has never read sf in his life. But he doesn't like it. Why? He will occasionally see a Japanese cheapie, or something like "The Beast with a Million Eyes," and take those to be prime examples of sf. I think the big problem is this kind of bad publicity. A non-sf fan will pick up a magazine. If it says "science fiction" on the cover, he will promptly put it down. The word "fantasy" even makes it worse. (Even I, a seven year sf fan, never even bothered to pick up fantasy until I mistakingly glanced at a copy of FANTASTIC a few months ago.)

If science fiction is not labeled sf by the

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author and critics, then it's all right (look at Vonnegut). Another possible reason for the "hostility" towards sf could be the antitechnological feeling currently running through some parts of the country today. Some people fear technology. They are afraid of the future. But this is exactly what sf is. Science fiction tells of the future, the marvels that it will bring. This could be why some people are turned off by sf.

One final thought on the subject. Some sf fans may not buy all the magazines because they hear about it from friends and others who are not sf fans. I, myself, get it at school (but I still buy the magazines). These antagonists of sf fans may well be people from the categories in the above paragraphs.

Most AMAZING and FANTASTIC readers know your stand against *Star Trek* (I personally disagree with you), but I would like to know how you feel about the new series *UFO*. My main gripe with it are the sounds we keep hearing while the action is in space. For example, viewers hear the explosions in space. Also there is the matter of smoke lazily trailing up from the rockets. It's no better that Flash Gordon's space ship. The general "unscientificness" of the series bugs me. What do you think, Ted?

To close, I just want to say that before you took over AMAZING and FANTASTIC I had nothing to do with either of them. Now I rank them ahead of *If* and *Galaxy*, second only to *Analog*. FANTASTIC is the only fantasy that I read, and the December cover is the best yet. Good luck in the future with both A and F.

TONY CVETKO
29415 Parkwood Drive
Wickliffe, Ohio 44092

The real problem is that science fiction scares most people—its very precepts scare them. If we changed its name, it would still scare them. What passes for sf on television (and in the movies) is considerably diluted for just this reason. Most tv sf is action-adventure set in a cliched future in which everyone wears tight-fitting clothing—a cliche which dates back more than thirty years—and in which the genuinely frightening (i.e., thought-provoking) elements are absent. UFO? I have seen only two episodes, both at a friend's house on his color set. It is my impression that it needs color for full enjoyment and that like most British thriller-series, its strong points are pacing and character bits; its weak points internal logic and plotting. I was reminded of a watered-down *Avengers*.—TW

Dear Mr. White,

I saw the February issue of FANTASTIC on the stands for the first time yesterday, the 24th [of January], although your issues are supposed to come out in the last week of the month each month. I don't know why *Fantastic* was late here this time, but the situation has been getting worse for quite some time now. Yet I seem to 'ave been the only fan here who cared too much about the superlate February FANTASTIC. One other fan, for instance, when I asked him why he thought the issue was late, said, "Probably Ted White didn't feel like putting out a fanzine this month." And looking at the circulation figures this year, I found that once again AMAZING STORIES and FANTASTIC trail the pack in circulation; they're still *badly* behind. I don't know what's wrong. In my opinion they're the two best sf magazines being published today, and even Sky Miller of *Analog* says you deserve the Hugo for best editor this year for bringing your charges out of the doldrums, which I agree with, but neither of your magazines is selling as well as even *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Could this be due at least partly to people *not knowing* that your magazines are much better than they were for so many years in the late sixties? I don't know. It does seem a shame, though, to understate the fact. AMAZING STORIES *was* the first sf magazine published, founded by Hugo Gernsback in 1926. It deserves more readers than it has. And FANTASTIC has a long, good tradition too. However the answer to both magazines' terrible circulation status might be to combine FANTASTIC into AMAZING STORIES and put out

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the later on a monthly basis, perhaps combining the editorial policy of both into the monthly AMAZING though. This would bring the circulation up to around 55,000 for the one magazine at the outset, and since the focus would then be on one and not two different magazines I think the figure would rise quickly well above that. In a way the two magazines are now competing with each other, and it creates, I think, some confusion in the market. Somewhat amusingly as a sidelight, though, you've harped on comic books more than once in the past, but while no sf magazine except *Analog* has a circulation of more than 100,000 and only one of the others has a circulation of more than 50,000, a comic book which drops below 100,000 in circulation is automatically dropped. No comic book being published, therefore, sells less then 100,000 copies per issue, while only one of the sf magazines equals that. That says *something* certainly.

The February issue itself was good on the whole, although as usual I lapped up the sf and the features and left the fantasy alone. Of the sf, I disliked only "As Dreams Are Made On," partly because it reminded of my own high school days which weren't exactly pleasant, however. "Nightmare Syndrome" was, er, fantastic. I hope you do more stories of and for black people. And I especially liked the ending of this one. Cool, baby, cool! "Rod Marquand's Jungle Adventure" was also good—and obviously a parody of the racist jungle story of the old pulps and not a racist story itself, of course. And I liked the the turn of the story which killed off the sexually liberal female character and left the virtuous hero alone, at least until the end. Being a sexual conservative, I enjoyed that in the same way I enjoyed the ending of "Oh, Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad."

The Panshins' column this issue was thoroughly entertaining again, and again because it dealt with sf history and I didn't start reading sf until 1967. I assume the next one or two issues will bring the history of sf up to the present. It seems from all I can gather that the best sf done after Wells was done in the periods 1939-1946 and 1960 to the present. I know some people who think that no good sf has been written after about 1950, but I think some of the most exciting sf of all time is being written *now*. And I find myself buying paperbacks with late sixties and early seventies copyright dates in about equal number to paperbacks with early and middle forties copyright dates. Sf has come close to dying many times, and the question of whether it won't someday, maybe soon, wither and die on the vine has been around as long as has the genre, but it keeps on, like Ol' Man River, goin' along. And I think now it's getting better all the time.

I particularly liked the unfavorable analysis by the Panshins of Poul Anderson's work. The William Buckley (or perhaps I should say the Ayn Rand) of science fiction, he's always been one of my least favorite writers. I met him briefly at the last Apollo launch, and I even got the distinction of being in the same car with him when Jim Mule ("The Trekkie" of New Orleans) drove him home that night from Joe Green's "post launch party," and he impressed me as being a very *nice* man, much different from how I'd imagined him to be. But he's still so far to the right, and it's so obviously infested into his writing that it's half infuriating and half laughable. Still, though, there's something that has to be said for a genre that can and does hold Poul Anderson and Samuel Delany.

In your editorial you talked about the *frightening* plans the postal service has for killing off the small circulation magazines, as well as doing other dastardly things. And maybe pressure on Congress could work. But in order for Congress to get aroused, their constituents have to get aroused first and then have to bring that to their attention. And I don't see that coming—at all. I'll remain optimistic, but, well, my father, for instance, works for The Postal Service and has no sympathy for the small circulation magazines in their fight against increasing mail rates. I cited the disgraceful case of *Life* to him, and he says the real

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reason it folded was because a lot of angry white people stopped their subscriptions to it over its "pro-black" policy. America!

I've heard speculation anyway that the increasing postal rates, etc. from our friendly federal monopoly will probably fold in the near future at least AMAZING STORIES, FANTASTIC, and *F&SF* and quite possibly also *Galaxy Magazine* and *Worlds of If.* Well, I'd really fret if that became imminent. I wouldn't miss *F & SF*, but I would miss the others. *Analog's* okay, but that's not enough. I wish you luck in the months ahead, as I extend the same wish to Mr. Jakobsson over at UPD.

One of the things other sf magazines have to battle now, of course, is competition from the original novels and anthologies in paperback. But while novels are predominantly an original book form, short stories are only to a still small extent relatively an original book form. They're also to a considerable extent still a magazine form. And *Strange Tomorrows* is the only even reprint anthology of either novellas or novelettes I know about yet. So what I recommend is that the sf magazines stop serializing new novels altogether and concentrate solely on short stories, novellas, novelettes, and features, especially novellas and novelettes. It would be one way to cope with the Ellisons, the Knights, and the Silverbergs for the sf readership in a rough market.

In *Algol* you said that it takes money to make money. And here again I think you're missing the boat. And when I say you this time, I mean *you.* Both *Analog* and *F&SF* publish annual "best" collections. That helps them out financially. You should do the same for AMAZING STORIES and FANTASTIC. That would contribute *some* of the money needed to make money. And it would have other appealing aspects too.

By the way, I was, er, disappointed when you printed the second to last paragraph of my letter this issue. I wrote that at approximately 3:00 in the morning, and I in no way believe that things will happen just that way at all in the future as I "speculated." But that was still part of a letter intended for publication, so it just serves me right for leaving it in in the first place, although at that hour of the morning I was too tired to take it out. As I've indicated earlier, I wouldn't miss *F&SF* if it went under but I would miss any of the other sf magazines if they folded. And even with 5 or 6, not counting the new one which I eagerly await, even were they all monthly, we could still use more. And *Planet Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories* were just the two titles from the pre-1950 era that stuck deepest in my mind over the years. Of course, if I were to choose the names of new magazines of original sf, I'd choose not *Planet Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories* but *Startling Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories,* after the two magazines which were so excellent in the late forties under Mssrs. Merwin and Mines. As for the rest of that second to last paragraph, just chalk it up to lack of sleep or whatever, *please.* (And if they'll only forgive me at Marvel!)

Harlan Ellison got the Best Magazine Hugo category changed to Best Editor for suspicious motives at the LACon, and now none of the sf magazines may be honored in that category this year at all. The two names I hear mentioned most seriously are Betty Ballantine and Donald Wollheim, followed by Ed Ferman. But I agree with you that one of the magazine editors should get it, and I hope it's one of the others rather than Mr. Ferman. As far as the rest of the ballot goes, I'm nominating "On the Last Afternoon" for third best novella and "Vampire from the Void" for second best novelette. Oh, yes, I've given up my idea of boycotting the worldcon over nudity in the costume event. I came around to the idea that my money wouldn't actually be used to even partially or indirectly finance the bringing of nudity into the worldcon on an official basis, so I now can join Torcon 2 and Discon 2 with a guiltless conscience, and indeed I have done so already and have been and continue to urge everyone I know to join both this year's and next year's worldcon—and to vote for New Orleans as the site of the 1976 convention.

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LESTER G. BOUTILLIER
2726 Castiglione Street
New Orleans, Louisiana

*Don't count on the authenticity of all those circulation figures you've read; some have a history of inaccuracy. However, you're right that we trail the pack, and you may well be right that a bad reputation from the reprint days still lingers on with many who haven't checked us out in the last few years. *Sigh* . . . However, combining* FANTASTIC *with* AMAZING *is not the answer. It's an accepted fact in publishing that two bimonthly magazines will sell more copies (total) than one monthly over a two-month period. Part of the reason is that a bimonthly remains (in theory at least) on sale for twice as long. Another is that while our readerships don't overlap 100%, there is a considerable overlap. Were we to combine the two magazines into one, we might sell even less copies of that magazine, on a per-issue basis, that* AMAZING *or* FANTASTIC *sell now. As for the lateness of the February issue and prospects for* Best of*—anthologies, see my editorial this issue.*—TW

Dear Ted,

I really hate to tell you this, but Eric Frank Russell's novelette "Vampire From the Void," in the October issue of FANTISTIC has been previously published. On page 147 of Sam Moskowitz's book, *Seekers of Tomorrow,* (Ballantine, 95¢; 1967; U7083) there is this passage: *"The Atompacker* was sold to and appeared in the undated (1939) second issue of FANTASY as *Vampire From the Void."*

That's all.

JOHN CARL
3750 Green Lane
Butte, Montana 59701

Although it is possible than Russell reused the ideas in that story (I've not read it), I doubt very much that it was the same *story we published under that title. (The title has been much-used, of course, and if a better one had occurred to me, I would have substituted it. Unfortunately, none did.)*—TW

Dear Ted,

About two years ago I went into a store and bought a magazine. It happened to be the April '71 issue of FANTASTIC STORIES. It was the first copy of that particular magazine I had ever bought. Since then I have bought every subsequent issue. So now I have finally decided to write a letter and comment on how FANTASTIC has progressed and how I think it might progress still further.

I didn't find that first issue particularly great; in fact it was rather poor thinking back on it now. However, since then the magazine has improved greatly in many respects. The title design and cover stalk changed within the next two issues and for the better. And the layout of the contents page improved.

But these were just minor changes. The major ones were in quality of the fiction and the exterior and interior artwork. I'd like first to talk about the cover art. It's much better now than it used to be. That April issue by Morrow was rotten. But by the next issue it was already improved. I think that one was by Akdins. I wish you'd get more work by him. From then on I like just about every cover except the one on the December '72 issue. I especially like the cover art done by Kaluta and Hinge. (By the way doesn't he do anything besides robots; that's all I have seen.) The interior artwork has also improved in the past two years, but not as much. I like the fullpage illustrations you've been putting in lately, (I missed it last issue.) but the others are usually too small and sometimes not very well drawn. Here I like the work of Cockrum, Kaluta and Cook. And I would like to see more of Roland's work; it was good for the Conan novella. I don't like Staton's or Hinge's interior art. Staton's work is too cartoonish and Hinge's, to me anyway, is not full enough. Oh yes! Now that I'm on art I might as well talk about the portfolios you now seem to be featuring regularly. I don't like them. The quality is quite poor except for Finlay; but

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my major gripe here is this: It seems to me that you've gotten rid of the "classic" repeat of fiction only to replace it by "classic" repeats of art. With these portfolios in the magazine I don't see as how you can feature much new fiction, which I would prefer. If you can't get enough good new fiction, why not put in larger illustrations or more of them for the stories you already have.

New subject! Alexei and Cory Panshins' column: I'm enjoying it much more now that they're into the history of the development of science fiction. I didn't care for Alexei's columns when he was harping on changing the name of science fiction into creative fantasy or speculative fiction. To me the topic was, is and always will be irrelevant.

Your editorials are usually good and I enjoy reading them. However I don't care for de Camp's articles, although I did like the ones on Pratt and Lovecraft. I would prefer more new fiction instead.

On to the fiction now! The quality of it has improved greately. The novels are excellent. I only wish you could get some longer ones. I really wouldn't mind waiting the extra time if the novels were serialized over three issues instead of two. The short fiction hasn't improved as much but it is still better than it used to be. In your fiction, from the newer authors, I like Eklund's work and Greg Benford's and Tiptree's. I'd also like to see more work by Anderson, Silverberg, Carr and Brunner in your pages.

Other suggestions! I would like to see FANTASTIC go monthly. Failing that, at least an increase in pages. Also I would like to see a more regular book review column. Have you thought about a column that would review sf films at the movies and on television? And how about Alexei or someone else doing a column criticising the works of famous sf authors like Asimov, Pohl and Silverberg.

All in all though you've improved FANTASTIC greatly over the past two years. I hope you can keep doing so.

ED MILEWSKI
289 Gervais St.
Midland Ont. Canada

When an issue is put together, the stories are selected first and the amount of fiction (in terms of wordage) is the same from issue to issue. The remaining space goes to the features. On occasion I underestimate the length of features I will need, and extra space is left in the issue—but too late to set another story in type to fill it. When this happens, a portfolio of art is selected to fill out the remaining space. When a portfolio appears, it means the features were shorter than usual. (In the past year we have changed typesetters once and typestyles and sizes several times, in an effort to achieve a suitable balance between packing the most material into an issue and keeping the type readable. These changes have caused us to over- or underestimate the proper length for the features on several occasions. But I have tried to keep the fiction content a constant. We seem to have settled now into a comfortable format, and I don't believe you'll be seeing as many portfolios from now on—he said with fingers crossed.) Under the circumstances—with more space presently devoted to features than any other sf magazine save AMAZING*—I don't plan to add a tv/movie column (nor has one been offered by anyone I would consider qualified by either taste or experience). However, with the termination this issue of the Panshins' column, we may follow your suggestion of reviewing specific authors in depth. (The Panshins originally planned to continue their column in this vein, but decided, upon reconsideration, that their time would be more wisely spent on writing more fiction themselves.) Several other projected replacements have also been mooted about our giant editorial offices, and one of them may well make its appearance next issue. Stay tuned. . .*

Next issue: the surprising conclusion of "The Son of Black Morca," and an unusually fine group of shorter stories will make up our 21st Anniversary issue. And, coming in our November issue, Jack Dann's complete short novel, "Junction." It's totally different from anything you've ever read!—TED WHITE

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most two years, I circled and circled the subject of sf, attempting to understand it, attempting to put it in order, attempting to get a handle on it.

However, the point I made at the outset may have been forgotten or overlooked. About a year ago, for instance, I received an article criticizing the column from a fan. It made the mistake of trying to treat the columns from those first two years as though they were consistent with each other. They were not. They were a series of approaches to a problem that I could not solve. In the terms we were using in the discussion above, they were attempts to define and deal with an impasse.

The last of these columns was that in the February 1972 issue, the first column to be signed by both Cory and me. The new byline was less a new fact than a belated admission of an already existing situation. The columns since that time have been a coherent account of the history of modern sf from the beginning of the last century until the present time. These columns have been consistent with each other and might well be criticized as a whole. Their consistency is not a result of the addition of Cory's name to the column. Cory's name was added to the column because we had finally arrived at the theory we had been searching for, because we had found our way out of the impasse, and because it seemed fully time to acknowledge Cory's contribution to what has been our mutual work through these past few years.

The seven historical columns that we have published are an abridged version of a major portion of a large book on the history and theory of modern sf. As I write, we have 500 manuscript pages of the book completed, with something less than two hundred to go. If all goes well, we should be done with our book, *The World Beyond the Hill*, late in the spring of 1973, about the time this column appears. This is the end toward which we have been working for these past three years.

As the editor announced after we began this venture, the column has existed for the sake of a book—originally for the sake of a book I once wrote on science fiction that was never published and now will not be. With the completion of *The World Beyond the Hill*, the basis for this column no longer exists.

In consequence, we mean to give it up and return to the writing of stories—one of the first of which to be finished will be the novel that is appearing in this issue of FANTASTIC. What we see immediately before us in sf is several years comparable in excitement and import to 1934-35. We wish to be part of this period of experimentation. We have some story approaches to test. We hope you like them.

As for all that is past, thank you for your kind attention through these three years.

—ALEXEI & CORY PANSHIN

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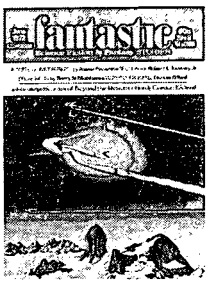

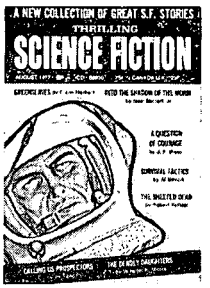

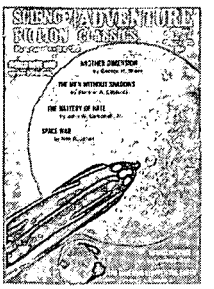

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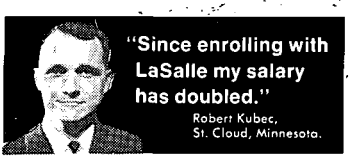

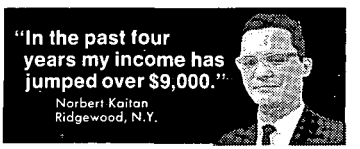

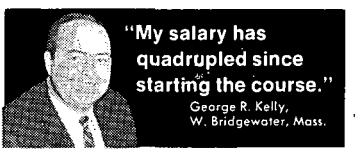

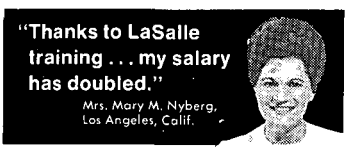

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